The World Is an Ashram
Category : English
Published by Anonymous on Mar. 01, 2006

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Life is demanding and you have no time for spiritual pursuits? Everyday happenings offer abundant opportunities to evolve.

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Published in:
Hinduism Today
April/May/June 2006

In hinduism we are fortunate to have many God-realized souls to guide us along the spiritual path. Their teachings are so profound and powerful that they penetrate our normal consciousness and give us new insights into how to live to maximize our spiritual progress.

Our paramaguru, Yogaswami, of Jaffna, Sri Lanka, gave us one such gem when he said, "The world is an ashram, a training ground for the achievement of moksha, liberation."

Yogaswami's statement has a parallel in William Shakespeare's play "As You Like It."

All the world's a stage,

And all the men and women merely players:

They have their exits and their entrances;

And one man in his time plays many parts,

His acts being seven ages.

Here is a paraphrase of Shakespeare's lines, adapted to reflect Yogaswami's spiritual meaning:

All the world's an ashram,

And all the men and women are divine souls;

They are spiritually maturing through earthly experiences,

And one soul in its time takes many births,

And thus evolves into oneness with God.

Let's look more closely at what it means to say that all the world's an ashram. An ashram, of course, is the residence and teaching center of a swami or spiritual preceptor. It is a place we go to learn about our religion and make spiritual progress. When we go out the door of our home to go to work, school or elsewhere, do we have in mind that we are going to an ashram, that our actions during the day in the office, factory, hospital, classroom or elsewhere will help us evolve spiritually and bring us closer to moksha? Probably not. When we come home and reflect back on the day, do we feel we made spiritual progress while out of the home? Probably not. Why is this? It is because we have not been trained to look at life in this way. We think of the ashram as a place of spiritual advancement, and we regard the world as a place of mundane tasks and distractions from our spiritual work. The common idea is that what we do in the ashram, the home shrine or the temple is what brings us spiritual progress, and what we do at the office or in the classroom has nothing to do with our spiritual life.

This common perspective is not the viewpoint of great souls such as Yogaswami. Such souls know that much spiritual progress can be made during our time in the world if we hold the right perspective. I call this approach "spiritualizing daily life." Let's bring this concept down to Earth by dividing the occasions for spiritual progress when out in the world into two categories: facing life's challenges and finding opportunities to serve.

First, let's look at facing life's challenges. Life is going to come to you whether you want it to or not. Joyful, easy times, difficult times, happy days and sad - it is all coming. It is all there, in your karma. It can't help but come. So you don't have to go looking for it. You don't have to go try and do something different. You can't avoid it. You can't hide from it.

Life's challenges will come to us. What is going to happen is going to happen. But where the focus should be, for those on the spiritual path, is on how we respond to

these challenges. Why? Because that is where we have a choice. For example, a small infant keeps us awake all night by crying. How do we respond to it? Does it upset us? Do we complain? Or, do we just accept it and respond back with lots of love? In every experience of life we have control over our response. It can be impulsive or thoughtful. It's our choice.

When accused of something that we didn't do, how do we respond? When we face challenges at work - say our boss is unfair with us, yells at us - what is our reaction? We want to yell back, but cannot. So, do we go home and yell at the spouse? In all such cases, we have choices. It is not the challenges that come, but how we face those challenges that makes the difference. We can react emotionally without thinking about spiritual principles. We can get angry or despondent. We can worry a lot and become irritable.

Or we can decide to control any emotional reactions that we might have. We can choose to live without anger. We can choose to cultivate patience. We can choose to be kinder to other people, to be more generous. That is what makes us spiritually stronger. As we curb our instinctive nature, our soul nature shines forth.

In other words, if we get angry now and then, let us try and eliminate anger altogether. If we get impatient with people who seem to explain things at great lengths when they could be explained in a short way, let's learn how not to get impatient. Let us learn how to accept that verbosity is their nature.

Here is the list of six common challenges we face in life that provide us with good opportunities for spiritual progress if we respond in a wise manner with self-control.

First Challenge: Mistreatment by Others. Life provides us a steady stream of experiences in which we are mistreated by others. Rather than retaliate or hold resentment, we can forgive and respond with kindness.

Second Challenge: Our Own Mistakes. When we make a major error, we have a choice to wallow in self-doubt and self-deprecation or to figure out how to not repeat the mistake.

Third Challenge: Difficult Projects. When faced with tasks that stretch our abilities, we can do the minimal just to get by or be inspired to do our best by looking at them as opportunities to improve our concentration, willpower and steadfastness, all of which will enhance our meditation abilities and inner striving.

Fourth Challenge: Disturbed Emotions. When we get upset by life's experiences, we have a choice to suffer the emotional upheaval or to strive to pull ourselves out of it as quickly as possible.

Fifth Challenge: Interpersonal Conflicts. When serious disagreements, quarrels or arguments occur, we have a choice to hold a grudge and perhaps even shun the person or to resolve the matter and keep the relationship harmonious.

Sixth Challenge: Gossip and Backbiting. When those around us indulge in gossip, rumors, backbiting and intrigue, we have a choice to join in or to not participate and even, among those close to us, make it clear that we do not approve.

The second category of occasions for spiritual progress when out in the world is what I call finding opportunities to serve. Here is an introduction to this concept from Gurudeva's Living with Siva which beautifully illustrates the idea of spiritualizing daily life through service.

"Go out into the world this week and let your light shine through your kind thoughts, but let each thought manifest itself in a physical deed of doing something for someone else. Lift their burdens just a little bit and, unknowingly perhaps, you may lift something that is burdening your mind. You erase and wipe clean the mirror of your own mind through helping another. We call this karma yoga, the deep practice of unwinding, through service, the selfish, self-centered, egotistical vasanas [subconscious inclinations] of the lower nature that have been generated for many, many lives and which bind the soul in darkness. Through service and kindness, you can unwind the subconscious mind and gain a clear understanding of all laws of life. Your soul will shine forth. You will be that peace. You will radiate that inner happiness and be truly secure, simply by practicing being kind in thought, word and deed."

There are many opportunities to help others at home, work, school, in the neighborhood and community. We have developed a list of six simple practices. Let me briefly introduce them.

First Opportunity: Seeing God in Those We Greet. When greeting someone, we strive to look deeply enough into them to see God, to see them as a divine being evolving through experience into oneness with God. Our attitude is then naturally helpful and benevolent.

Second Opportunity: Volunteering. There are many opportunities each day to step forward and offer to help in ways that are beyond what is required of us. An attitude of humble service diminishes the ego and strengthens our spiritual identity. One important spiritual attitude to hold is to be willing to help when called upon, to not resist or refuse, to be as open to helping others as you are in doing things for yourself.

Third Opportunity: Expressing Appreciation. We can uplift and encourage others by sincerely expressing how grateful we are for their help, friendship and importance in our life.

Fourth Opportunity: Helping Newcomers. In our modern world, people move around a great deal. Thus there is a steady flow of newcomers at work, at school, in our neighborhood and at our temple. Stepping forward to welcome and help orient them to their new environment is an excellent way to be of service.

Fifth Opportunity: Offering Hospitality. Everyone can find creative ways to be hospitable in the home, at school and even at work.

Sixth Opportunity: Making Encouraging and Complimentary Remarks. Make a point to say something encouraging and complimentary to everyone you meet. Their day will be brighter because of it, and so will yours.

In conclusion, having a great day needs to mean more than getting a bonus at work or an A on a school test. It should include the spiritual progress you made that day through effectively facing life's challenges and the ways in which you helped and uplifted others. Our list of twelve practices is a good beginning, but hopefully you will keep expanding it as additional insights come from your striving to maximize the spiritual progress you can make from the experiences and opportunities each day brings. Also, parents can teach children to consciously strive for spiritual progress each day at school by facing life's challenges and finding opportunities to serve.