Using TV as a Spiritual Tool
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Television, like real life, can help us work through our karma, if we approach it in the right way

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Audio Only:

Television is a little like god: it's everywhere. Traveling by plane and staying in hotels, you encounter TV at dawn in the hotel's fitness center, then in the breakfast cafe and later at the airport and even on the plane 30,000 feet above the Earth! Settling down that night in your next hotel three thousand miles away, the TV is there; and sometimes it has already been turned on for you! Talk about ubiquitous influences.

A well-researched web article notes that close to 100 percent of the adult population watch some television every day in the media-saturated societies of North America, Western Europe, East Asia and in most Latin American countries. In the rest of the world--with the exception of some African countries and India, where the percentages are 56 percent and 64 percent, respectively--TV is the daily fare of 70 to 85 percent of the adult population.

The best TV shows are viewed all over the world. When my guru, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, visited South Africa in the 1990s, he was advised not to hold events on Wednesday nights because the popular American soap opera "Dallas" was on that night, and everyone would stay home to watch it. When populations around the globe view the same material on television, it unifies the thinking, for better or worse, and thus the actions, of Earth's peoples. Gurudeva observed, "Today, television has become an instrument to convey knowledge and bring the world together, set new standards of living, language, styles of dress and hair, ways of walking, ways of standing, attitudes about people, ethics, morality, political

systems, religions and all sorts of other things, from ecology to pornography."

Television, like the fashion world, has its own trends over the decades. There was a time, back in the 60s, when nearly every show was about cowboys and Indians, set in America's Wild, Wild West. Then came the era of quiz shows, like the "$64,000 Question" and "Truth or Consequences." Around the same time, there was a wave of Carol Burnette and Ed Sullivan type talent shows. Later, TV featured evening dramas: "Dynasty," "Falcon Crest" and a galaxy of others. More recently, humanity has been inundated with stories about detectives, crime scene investigators, lawyers, reality shows and dirty, rotten scoundrels.

Lately, we have a new breed of fiction and nonfiction programming with mystical themes: prescient dreams, immortality and reincarnation, humans with remarkable powers such as reading minds, seeing and speaking to the dead, stopping time, listening to people's thoughts and flying through space and time. It's a fascinating evolution to follow, and I find it encouraging that viewers are interested in these mystical ideas and themes, interested in the untapped potential of the human mind.

How does significant exposure to television affect us? Is it making us wiser or worldlier? Is it a help or a hindrance to our spiritual progress? The key lies in how we approach it and what we watch. Approached in the right way, TV can be a tool for spiritual progress.

To elucidate this point, let's compare TV to the world. Our Paramaguru, Siva Yogaswami, noted: "The world is an ashram, a training ground for the achievement of moksha, liberation." Of course, for that to be true for you, you have to make it that way; you have to hold that perspective. What is the world to a care-free, fun-loving high schooler? It's a place to party, kick back and hang out. To an up-and-coming entrepreneur, the world holds the promise of lots of money. That's his focus. Others are focused on fulfilling a profession or perfecting an art. To some, it's all about relationships, making friends, building a family. In short, the world is what we make it. It's not something unto itself that we all look at the same way.

To the practicing, mystically awakened Hindu, the world is fundamentally a place to make spiritual progress, where we face our karma and grow from experience.

Karma normally comes to us through individuals or groups of people. It is not always pleasant. Situations don't always work out fairly. Sometimes we are mistreated. Philosophically, we know that this is the result of our prarabdha karmas. How we face such situations is crucial. The instinctive response is to retaliate: "This person is mistreating me, so I'm going to mistreat him in the same way." But if we do retaliate, we create new negative karma which will return to us as painful experiences in the future. That is not spiritual progress.

As I explained in our "Karma Management" Insight (Oct/Nov/Dec, 2002), the goal is 1) to not retaliate; 2) instead, accept the karma that comes to us as our own creation; and 3) ideally, forgive and forget the whole event, rather than holding onto it and letting it gnaw at us on the inside. When we successfully handle a karma according to these three principles, we make spiritual progress. We are looking at the world as an ashram.

Gurudeva explained this beautifully: "Hindus know that the object of life is to go through our experiences joyously and kindly, always forgiving and compassionately understanding, thus avoiding making unseemly kriyamana karmas in the current life which, if enough were accumulated and added to the karmas we did not bring into this life, would bring us back into another birth, and the process would start all over again."

Like living in the world in the right spirit, viewing television from the correct perspective can help us face and manage our karma. As Gurudeva noted, "Television has afforded us the ability to work through our karmas more quickly than we could in the agricultural age. On TV, the 'other people' who play our past experiences back to us, for us to understand in hindsight, are actors and actresses, newscasters and the people in the news they broadcast. Hindus know nothing can happen, physically, mentally or emotionally, but that it is seeded in our prarabdha karmas, the action-reaction patterns brought with us to this birth. Therefore, on the positive side, we look at television as a tool for karmic cleansing. The great boon that television has given humanity, which is especially appreciated by Hindus, is that we can soften our prarabdha karmas quickly by analyzing, forgiving and compassionately understanding the happenings on the screen, as our past is portrayed before us, and as we work with our nerve system, which laughs and cries, resents, reacts to and avoids experiences on the TV."

That is a powerful idea: that television is a tool for karmic cleansing. It's all in our

approach, our attitude, toward it. Specifically, television helps soften our karmas. The karma still comes to us, but we have prepared ourself to receive it by watching similar situations on television and gaining an understanding the nature of that kind of action and reaction. We have "pre-lived" it through the actors and actresses. Thus, when the karma comes, we don't react as strongly, or it comes to us in a less disruptive way. We handle it with less emotion and more wisdom, less reaction and more understanding.

Parents can help their children learn to use television to increase spirituality by watching programs together and discussing them afterwards. Talk about the various characters, their actions and the consequences of those actions. A good perspective to convey is that "All men are your teachers. Some teach you what to do, and others teach you what not to do." Oftentimes on today's television programs the principles of reincarnation and karma are presented in one form or another. This can be pointed out and discussed to see how accurately the concept was presented. There's even a popular comedy about karma, called "My Name Is Earl," which tells of a man working hilariously to resolve his past misdeeds. Mystical practices, which are common in recent shows, such as being able to read other's thoughts or seeing the future in a dream, are also useful to talk about with children, drawing out lessons to be learned.

Before the widespread viewing of television, storytelling was a common form of entertainment. Gurudeva describes this shift: "Television at its best is storytelling. We used to sit around and tell stories. The best storyteller, who could paint pictures in people's minds, was the most popular person in town. In every country, at every point in time, humans have sat down and been entertained, and entertainers have stood up and entertained them."

The advantage of storytelling is that the teller or reader of the story can choose tales with strong dharmic themes and avoid those with adharmic ones. With television, while you do have the choice of what shows to watch, the themes and plots are in the hands of the writers and producers, who come from all sorts of backgrounds. So, it can take some creativity on your part to find ways to view television--personally and with your children--so that it strengthens you spiritually, makes you wiser rather than worldlier.

Definitely, we don't want to watch TV too much. Gurudeva's advice is: "Siva's devotees may watch television and other media for recreation and to keep informed

about the world, limiting viewing to about two hours a day. They avoid nudity, foul language, crudeness and excessive violence.... Television can be very entertaining and helpful, or it can be insidiously detrimental, depending on how it is used. Therefore, fortify your mind with a thorough understanding of what you are watching."