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Zero Tolerance for Disharmony

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Hundreds of years ago in the city of Madurai, known as the Athens of India for its cultural achievements, at the Meenakshi Somasundaresvara Sivan Koyil, there was constructed within the vast temple tank a magic boat called the philosophers' barge. Rishis came from the Himalayas, panditsfrom all corners of India and humble bhakta siddhasfrom the South to sit together and discuss life, illumination and release from mortality and rebirth. The magic lay in the boat's extraordinary ability to expand to accommodate any number of people who conversed with an attitude of respect and harmony. But it grew smaller when discussion turned rancorous, and those who brought the contention suddenly found themselves in the water, swimming to shore in embarrassment. In Siva's temple, it seems, only nonargumentative discussion was allowed. We have no magic boat today, or perhaps we do.

During my recent pilgrimage to India, I spoke to several large groups of devotees, including hundreds of sadhusof the Swami Narayan Fellowship (that's Pramukhswami Maharaj in the photo during his 75th birthday celebrations in Bombay), about zero tolerance for inharmonious conditions. Everyone found

the message pertinent, yet difficult to believe, for there is no group of people on Earth for whom living in harmony is not a challenge at one time or another. But it is true that among my devotees we have zero tolerance for disharmonious conditions of any kind.

Harmony is the first and foremost standard of living in all spheres, but particularly in spiritual work it is a must. Striving for harmony begins within the home and radiates out into all dimensions of life, enhancing and making joyous and sublime each relationship for every devotee. Thus, each strives to be kindly in thought, word and deed, to unfold the beautiful, giving qualities of the soul, to utter only that which is true, kind, helpful and necessary. The great Tamil Saint Tiruvalluvar offers the following sage advice in the Tirukural,verse 100: "To utter harsh words when sweet ones would serve is like eating unripe fruit when ripe ones are at hand."

"Yes, this is the ideal. But what if conflict and contention do arise?" I was asked time after time. My answer was that, in our fellowship, all work stops and the problem is attended to at once. It is each one's responsibility to follow this wisdom. Nothing could be more foolish than to continue work, especially religious work, while conflict prevails, for demonic forces have been unleashed that must be dispelled for any effort to be fruitful and long lasting. The breach in the angelic force field of the home, monastery or workplace must be sealed off quickly.

Our approach is simple. We are all committed to the shared sadhanathat all difficult feelings must be resolved before

sleep, lest they give rise to mental argument and germinate as unwanted troublesome vasanas,subconscious impressions, that cannot be totally erased but only softened and neutralized through the mystic processes of atonement. Disharmony is disruption of the harmonious pranicflow: anger, argument, back-biting, walking out of meetings, painful words and hurt feelings. The Vedasintone, "May our minds move in accord. May our thinking be in harmony--common the purpose and common the desire. May our prayers and worship be alike, and may our devotional offerings be one and the same."

If the disruption is not resolved before sleep, then a kukarmaphala,fruit of wrongdoing, will be created. The hurt feelings and mental arguments continue to fester until the matter is brought up and openly faced to be resolved. If not resolved within 72 hours, the problem germinates, and elders must take action under spiritual guidance to rectify the matter. The fact that all have chosen to avoid facing the difficulty shows that more serious remedies are required.

Resolution in all cases is accomplished through the hri prayaschitta:apology, the showing of remorse, talking together in small groups and giving gifts as reconciliation. Humility is the keynote. Sincere apology is offered for participating in argument or confusion, even if one was not necessarily to blame; the karmawas there that attracted the situation. Harmony is reinstated by honestly accepting apologies, by forgiving and forgetting with the firm resolve to never bring up the matter again. It is based on the common understanding that by working together on the firm foundation of love and trust all will progress in religious service and worship. Through these efforts, a sukarmaphala,fruit of right doing, is

deliberately created. When two shishyassit to settle a disharmony, it is often helpful for an uninvolved third party to be present, even silently, to balance the energies.

Sadhana--personal transformation through self effort--is the magic balm that soothes the nerve system, giving strength for each shishyato have forbearance with people and patience with circumstances. When sadhanais neglected, problems close in. Families find it difficult to see eye to eye. Hard feelings arise in even the simplest and well-intended encounters, for the individuals have become too externalized.

There is a natural harmony existing in our mission satsangas and in each gathering of shishyas.Rarely is much discussion required when activities are being carried out, for the lines of authority based on seniority are always clear. This is the first boon for maintaining harmony among a group. Ours is a traditional hierarchical system of governance, upheld within our family and monastic communities, established when the Vedaswere created. It is a system where the elders, in a loving way, speak down to the youngers and disallow them to speak up argumentatively or contentiously to them. So, there is always an atmosphere of respect, loving harmony and meeting of minds. Never is scolding heard or feelings hurt or arguments provoked or sincere questions left unanswered. Here "love is the sum of the law," and the heartfelt feelings going out from the elders protect and support those who will one day themselves be elders. We create a secure and loving society in which intelligence overrides controversy and the only rigid rule is wisdom. Thus the pranicmagnetism of the family or monastery is maintained and ever building for sustainable success and spirituality.

Yes, I can tell you from experience that zero tolerance for inharmonious conditions is a workable law and sadhanathat can and should be adopted by all spiritual groups and people. There is more about this subject in my book, Saiva Dharma Sastras.It is a 480-page treasury of wisdom about spiritual life and group administration. It sells for $24.95, but we are offering it to our Hinduism Today readers for $20, including shipping, through August 1st.