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We Are Whom We Meet

The company we keep affects our attitudes, speech and actions as profoundly as the foods we eat

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We are all familiar with the phrase "we are what we eat." The Hindu viewpoint on this is that the different types of food we consume have a significant influence on our state of mind and emotions. For example, eating meat, which is known to be a tamasic food, opens the door to lower consciousness and makes it harder to stay out of the states of fear, anger, jealousy and the remorseful emotions that follow. Consuming too many spicy foods and stimulants, or rajasic foods, can overexcite our physical and intellectual activity. On the other hand, pure, or sattvic, foods--such as fresh fruits and vegetables that grow above the ground--foster our intuitive or soul nature. For maximum spiritual progress, it is best to eat plenty of sattvic foods, to be moderate in the intake of rajasic foods and to avoid tamasic foods. The Chandogya Upanishad (7.26.2) teaches: "When the food is pure, mind becomes pure. When the mind becomes pure, memory becomes firm. And when a man is in possession of a firm memory, all the bonds which tie him down to the world are loosened."

Today I want to expand the idea that "We are what we eat" by pointing out that our companions are an equally important influence on our state of mind and emotions--hence the title "We are whom we meet." The ethical scripture Tirukural, in Chapter 46, "Avoidance of Base Company," has ten insightful verses describing how powerfully we are influenced by the company we keep. Here are two of the verses. "As water changes according to the soil through which it flows, so a man assimilates the character of his associates." "Even perfect men, possessing the mind's full goodness, are fortified by pious fellowship."

Our actions, speech, state of consciousness and attitudes toward life are all strongly influenced by our companions, just as they are by the food we eat. Therefore, it is important to surround oneself with good, religious, higher-consciousness people. Every few months, I receive an e-mail from someone saying that he or she used to perform sadhana (regular religious practices), but stopped some time ago and now wants to get started again. The advice I give always includes attending a weekly satsang with others who are also performing sadhana. It can be difficult to sustain sadhana if you are striving alone. We need the companionship of others on the path to keep our sadhana strong, especially during difficult times in life. As my Gurudeva, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniaswami, often said: "The group helps the individual and the individual helps the group."

Of course, we must choose wisely, as companions can also influence us negatively. Here is a story to illustrate. A teenage boy starting his first year at high school made new friends who had a habit of swearing. The boy never swore previously but because he spent significant time with his new friends, he soon adopted their crude language.

One of the times in life when religious companions are extremely important is during the university years, especially for students living away from home. The most obvious negative influence comes from fellow students who are more interested in partying than studying. A less visible, but equally erosive, influence comes from anti-religious instructors who propound atheism or existentialism and may even overtly demean Hinduism. Such encounters can instill negative habits and bring about loss of faith.

How to find suitable religious companionship? Universities are not necessarily close to satsang groups that could be attended regularly. For students whose university is close to a temple, we suggest visiting it weekly. If the temple is too far for a weekly visit, at least make an effort to attend during major festivals. Joining a Hindu students' group offers prime opportunities for interacting with peers who are spiritually inclined. If there is none at your school, but there are a good number of Hindu students at the university, consider founding a branch of an established Hindu students group on your campus. Other possibilities are to participate in an Indian cultural group, a yoga class or a meditation program.

Reinforcing Your Aura: Despite our best intentions to maintain pure companions, sometimes it can be necessary to interact at length with people who are strongly materialistic or even hedonistic. The challenge is to do so without letting their emotions penetrate and influence our own. If this does happen, you will experience their moods and emotions and may interpret them as your own.

If you could see the subtle energies of such an exchange, you would know that you have absorbed into your aura the dark reds, muddy browns and greens from another person's aura. You simply did not have enough prana in your aura to ward off the intrusion. Such thought forms and undesirable colors from others' auras are often called psychic influences.

The aura is a luminous, colorful field of subtle (or astral) energy radiating within and around the human body. The colors of the aura change constantly according to the ebb and flow of your state of consciousness, thoughts, moods and emotions. Fortunately, there are yogic exercises you can employ to vitalize your aura. Here is one such exercise from my guru:

"Sit quietly, breathe deeply and mentally get in touch with your pranic body, first by visualizing it and secondly by feeling it. The pranic body of most people extends out from the physical body about one or two inches, depending on the level of vitality. Of course, the pranic body also completely permeates the entire physical body. As you sit quietly, breathing deeply and slowly, become intimately aware of the vitality, the prana, running throughout the physical body. As you breathe in, feel the vitality of your body. Feel the magnetic energy within it. Feel its life. Then, as you breathe out, mentally and through feeling release some of this vitality, this prana, this life force, and send it out into your aura. Keep sending it out on the outbreath to the aura's outer edges all around your body, from your head to your feet. The outer edge of the human aura is about three or four feet away from the physical body. After you have charged your aura with vital prana in this way about nine times (nine breaths), you should begin to feel a magnetic shell being built around the outer edge of your aura. You will feel very secure and content as you sit within your own aura, which is charged with prana from your own pranic body. You are protected from all kinds of psychic influences, seen and unseen."

Despite our best efforts to keep our aura strong and not take on the worldly emotions of others, some of their thoughts and emotions can end up in our aura and influence us by lowering our consciousness and depressing our mood. What can

be done? These darker colors can be changed to lighter colors--and hence a more positive mood--by the blessings we receive from the Deity and devas when we go to the temple or home shrine. They can also be changed by the practice of meditation. The practice of regularly purifying our aura by temple attendance and meditation keeps our consciousness higher and our state of mind happier.

A very important time to purify the aura is when we return home from being out in the world. The practice I prescribe is to first bathe and then enter the shrine room for the blessings of the Deity and devas which, when received, will dispel worldly forces and help us regain a state of God consciousness.

Attending temple pujas can be an even more powerful way of purifying the aura. An aspect of puja in the temple that is not widely understood is how it relates to the flow of prana. Except for the concluding arati, puja is a process of giving prana to the Deity. This is done through offering cut fruit, cooked food, water, fragrant flowers and milk. Then, during the final arati, the Deity and his helpers, or devas, reflect back this prana into the aura of each devotee, purifying it of subconscious congestions. The devotee so blessed leaves the temple feeling uplifted and relieved of mental conditions he had been burdened by.

Here is a final word of advice from my Gurudeva on the importance of spiritual companionship: "To sustain shaucha, purity, it is important to surround oneself with good, devonic company, to have the discrimination to know one type of person from another. Too many foolish, sensitive souls, thinking their spirituality could lift a soul from the world of darkness, have walked in where even the Mahadevas do not tread and the devas fear to tread, only to find themselves caught in that very world through the deceit and conniving of the cleverly cunning. Let's not be foolish. Let's discriminate between higher consciousness and lower consciousness. Higher-consciousness people should surround themselves with higher-consciousness people to fulfill shaucha." The Tirukural observes: "Purity of mind and purity of conduct, these two depend upon the purity of a man's companions."