Satsang: Come, Hear the Wisdom of Mataji Vanamali
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Satsang

Come, Hear the Wisdom of Mataji Vanamali

When a wandering sage visits, spiritual insight showers on the community

Interview by Vatsala Sperling, Vermont, US

The hidden caves of the Himalayas have long been home to great souls in search of the Supreme Reality. From time to time, renunciates have descended from the majestic mountains and traveled to the plains of India, from one village to the next, on foot, spreading spiritual insight. Such wandering monks, called parivrajaka, are a time-honored tradition in India. Recently, Mataji Vanamali, a renunciate from Vanamali Ashram, Rishikesh, India, happened to pass through my city of Rochester, Vermont.

I had the unique honor of hosting this parivrajaka in my humble home. The local book-publishing company, Inner Traditions, arranged for Rochesterâ□□s Hindu community to have Matajiâ□□s darshan. As the Â-sadhvi generously shared her insight and wisdom, I thought other readers of Hinduism Today would enjoy her wise words, excerpted below.

Generations, Honoring the Elders and the Stages of Life

The role of elders in society, and their care, is becoming a problem in India, just like it is in America. But in our Hindu culture we have a system in place for that. Our social order was established by wise people, with a true understanding of the human psyche and our needs. They devised the three ashramas, the stages of life. In the first, brahmacharya ashrama, one should pursue education, self-development and the skills necessary for a fruitful and successful adult life. The next, grihastha ashrama, was meant for establishing oneself, getting married and raising a family while performing dharma (duty), earning artha (money) and enjoying kama (pleasure). At the final stage, vanaprastha ashrama, after many fulfilling years, the

couple is encouraged to dwell on spiritual matters and aim for moksha (liberation). Even today, in India, there are many ashramas that welcome old couples and give them opportunity for spiritual growth.

However, instead of following the prescription given to us by our wise ancestors, many elder parents tend to cling to power, money and control over the next generation. They do not want to let go. They do not volunteer to back off and let the children take charge. They blame their children for being ungrateful and heartless, having forgotten all sacrifices they made. In our demanding modern times, forcing young and harried couples into the role of care-providers for aging, ill or dependant parents causes a great deal of tension and hardship on everyone involved.

If the parents are truly evolved people, they will gladly loosen their hold. Parents must grow up and renounce the world and allow their children to take charge. The old parents should voluntarily pursue spiritual life and take renunciation from the familial involvement.

Arranged Marriages, Love and Divorce

All marriages have the same goals. In the West, the way people marry impresses on the couple the idea that since they have created their own marriage, they also have the freedom to destroy it, to get a divorce anytime, without any consideration for family, children or the society. But, quite on the contrary, in making the union themselves they have accrued a greater responsibility, becoming accountable for its success and continuation.

In the process of assisted marriage, the couple has the support of their family and society. They feel more secure. Their marriage survives a lifetime and even beyond. Since it is not based exclusively on physical attraction, it is much more stable. Answerable to the community, they are not quick to divorce.

But many Hindus begin to think that our traditional way of securing a marriage is a bore! Those are increasingly self-involved people. Parents can stop this trend by giving their children firm Hindu values, educating them about how marriage is more than just a coming together of two bodies. Marriage involves two souls, two families, two lineages, and it has to be honored. It should be seen as a way to spiritual self-fulfillment and not just a quick way to fulfill physical needs and wants.

My suggestion is: take marriage seriously; work honestly and hard to be true to your marriage vows.

The Value of Samskaras

I cannot stress enough the value of good samskaras and ideas that we put into the children. In early childhood they are learning from example, even when they donâ□□t seem to be listening.

Unfortunately, if both parents are working, they are compelled to send their all-too-young children to day-care or pay baby sitters. Kids spend most of their time in front of the TV. This seemingly innocuous practice messes up their growing neural network because of the fast pace of editing. Such fast-moving and loud images cause children to go numb to surroundings, lose the ability to imagine and become unable to sustain focus and mental concentration for more than a few minutes. With hours of â□□sedentary samadhiâ□□ in front of the TV, children begin to suffer from many issues for which they are dragged to doctors. Where is parenting in this lifestyle?

Mothers should take a few years off work until the kids are ready for school. The mother must spend as much time as possible with the kids, giving them a healthy start, love and support for their all-round growth and development. She can always return to the workforce once the kids have grown.

Parents have to understand that advice given just in words has no value. For a child, itâ□□s all about examples, events and actions. The samskaras prescribed by our religion have a deep effect, planting the seeds of positive thinking in children. At home, parents can set positive examples, such as speaking the truth, not stealing, not lying, not cheating, refraining from foul and abusive language, refusing to engage in abusive and manipulative behavior and staying loyal to their family.

On the Importance of Brahmacharya for the Youth

Keeping the mind pure and free is the very first objective of brahmacharya. Brahmacharya is not just physical, but spiritual. A true brahmachari does not fill his mind with lustful thoughts.

Hinduism recognizes that sex is a necessary and normal part of life. But sex is problematic when it becomes an obsession, as the media has it. Complete brahmacharya for our youth todayâ□□in mind and bodyâ□□is practically impossible because the entire atmosphere is charged with messages of lust and greed.

Our Hindu religion does not prescribe lifetime celibacy for everyone. It advocates marriage for the vast majority of people as young adults, so that their sexual energy can be channeled and focused into the spouse and is not running wild. If a young person wants to commit to lifetime brahmacharya for spiritual reasons, he must know that it is a difficult path to take, and distractions are many.

Being a Proud Hindu Anywhere

The word Hindu is of fairly recent use, coined by the West to define what in India has always been the one spiritual law. You will know a Hindu, a follower of Sanatana Dharma, by his behavior, beliefs and conduct. Those who prefer the term Vedic should not do so out of an inferiority complex or a sense of shame about being a Hindu. If people in this situation knew even a little about the great depth, beauty and meaning of Sanatana Dharma, they would become proud to call themselves Hindus.

Removed from their country, struggling to keep their faith alive in a foreign land, managing busy lives and careers, Hindus abroad have found that they must stick to some form of their culture, tradition and religion. Regrettably, they rarely find the time to go deep into the roots, to understand the true significance of their rituals and celebrations.

To these children of Sanatana Dharma, I say, go to your roots, read books on Hinduism, read the works of great scholars and spiritual teachers, understand the amazingly esoteric meaning of every single symbol, gesture, word, custom and ritual of Hinduism. If your parents donâ□□t know, educate them. You are the intelligent new guardians of the faith; you must learn to respect and admire your great culture and religionâ□□there is no faith as deep or as great as the Sanatana Dharma, the original mother of all religions and spiritual philosophies.

Hindus outside India are in a unique situation. Children in Western schools are teased about having a bindi, about their elephant God, about their beautiful and unabashedly feminine Goddesses, and about stone statues with many hands and faces. We must educate these children starting with the ABCs of Hindu religion. These children are often growing up with Christmas trees instead of ghee lamps and firecrackers on Deepavali day. They feel ashamed to be known as Hindus and begin drifting away. The kids need information and answers, and that is the parentsâ□□ responsibility.

Advice for All Hindus

My message is: follow the humble example of Hanuman, who embodies shakti (power) and bhakti (devotion). Without bhakti, pure shakti gives rise to arrogance. But coupled with bhakti, it gives direction and purpose to life and aids in spiritual evolution. By combining bhakti and shakti, you will find a positive expression and purpose, giving you peace of mind.