Parents Are the First Gurus in Religion and Character Building

Many Hindu families visiting our Hawaii monastery, particularly those with young children, ask if I have any advice for them. I usually respond with one or two general suggestions. I always stress the importance of presenting Hinduism to their children in a practical way so that it influences each child’s life for the better. Hindu practices should, for example, help children get better grades in school and get along well with others. Of course, there is not enough time in a short session to present all the many guidelines that a parent would find useful. Therefore, I decided to write up a full complement of suggestions to be handed to Hindu families in the future who want to know ways to present Hinduism to their kids. You hold the results in your hands: the parent’s guidebook of minimum teachings to convey to children. It is based on the teachings of my satguru, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, founder of Hinduism Today, distilled from insights he gained from over 40 years of closely working with hundreds of families in a score of nations. This booklet presents a gridwork of character-building designed to augment any tradition or denomination. The key is this: start teaching early and don’t stop until your children leave the home. Even if you did nothing more than what is outlined in these 16 pages, that would be enough to send them on their way as good Hindus, well-equipped to live as happy, effective citizens of the modern world.

Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami

Contents

IMPARTING BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES

Part 1 • Teach and practice Hinduism in your home.
Part 2 • Teach about the soul and our purpose on Earth.
Part 3 • Teach them about Hinduism’s greatness.
Part 4 • Teach about Hinduism and other religions.
Part 6 • Teach how Hinduism lets us know God.
Part 5 • Teach how to live positively in the world.

BUILDING GOOD CHARACTER

Part 1 • Cultivate nine key spiritual qualities.
Part 2 • Guide your children with love, not fear.
Look around at the younger generation of Hindus and you will find it is wonderful that many temples have in place educational programs. Without your help, there is no guarantee that we will continue to have these. In our modern world we do have movies, television and computers, and many Hindu children would much rather spend time at the temple. Why is this? There are many reasons. Families are not so close and trusting. It used to be far easier to get children to come to the temple, since it was the center of village life. Religion. One hundred years ago, before movies, television and musical concerts, the temple was a social and educational center that had a place in town. Besides the festivals, there were dramas, dances and plays that could be explained in ways that engage and inspire young seekers, counterbalancing the powerfully magnetic influences of the modern world.

Establish a shrine in the home. Hinduism is in no way more dynamically strengthened in the lives of children and the family than by establishing a shrine in the home. The home shrine works best when it is an entire room. That way it can be a quiet corner of a room, and more than a simple shelf or closet. Establishing a shrine can be explained in ways that engage and inspire young seekers, counterbalancing the powerfully magnetic influences of the modern world.

Parents can consciously and systematically develop key qualities in their children that will help them to be happy, religious and successful when they reach adulthood. A wise mother wrote to me once on e-mail saying, “I truly believe we lose part of our karma through our children, and we grow and improve as they do.” Though parents may think they are just helping their children be more happy, successful and religious, in truth parents cannot separate themselves from their children. The child’s growth and spiritual evolution is the parents’ as well. There are nine key qualities we want our children to possess. We will explore each of these to see what children should be taught, or not taught, by parents to develop that quality. The nine qualities are:

- Positive Self-Concept
- Perceptive Self-Correction
- Powerful Self-Control
- Playful Self-Contentment
- Pious Character
- Proficiency in Conflict Resolution
- Parental Clasness
- Prejudice-Free Consciousness

I. DEVELOP A POSITIVE SELF-CONCEPT

A positive self-concept arises when we think of ourselves as a worthy individual deserving of a wonderful life. How is this accomplished? It is through being generous with your praise and appreciation, making children know they are loved and valued, that who they are makes a difference and life has little to offer. Unfortunately, many children reach adulthood with a negative self-concept, feeling that others are better than they are and life has little to offer. A negative self-concept is developed through verbally running down a child through teasing, joking or insulting remarks. This, of course, needs to be stopped and replaced with encouragement and praise. When it comes to religious or spiritual matters, it is correcting misunderstandings between the person and the behavior. The behavior was foolish, not the person. For example, you can tell your children when they misbehave, “What you did was very foolish, but you are the person, and I’m sure you now know better and won’t do that again.” Parents should also not allow their children to call each other names, such as “fat” or “lame.” Having a positive concept about one’s outer self allows the child to accept the Hindu teaching that one’s inner self is divine, being a radiance and force. My Grandparents, Celebrate their Divinity. Enjoy them and enjoy good times with them.”
Part Two
Teach about the soul and our purpose on earth

Teach that life’s purpose is spiritual advancement.

The Hindu view of life is that we are a divine being, a soul, who experiences many lives on Earth, and that the purpose of our being here is spiritual unfoldment. Over a period of many lives we gradually become a more spiritual being and are thus able to experience spiritual consciousness more deeply. This eventually leads to a profound experience of God consciousness which brings to a close the process of reincarnation on Earth. This is called moksha, liberation. A great lady saint of North India, Anandamayi Ma, stated the goal of God Realization quite beautifully: “Man is a human being only so much as he aspires to Self Realization. This is what human birth is all about. To realize the One is the supreme duty of every human being.”

Teach the four traditional goals of life.

The four traditional Hindu goals of life are duty (dharma), wealth (artha), love (kama) and liberation (moksha). The Hindu has the same ambitions as do others. He or she wants to experience love, family and children, as well as a profession, wealth and respect. Dharma enjoins the Hindu to fulfill these ambitions in an honest, virtuous, dutiful way. Although dharma, artha and kama are often seen as ends in themselves, their greatest value is in providing the environment and experiences which help the embodied soul ever more deeply to experience spiritual consciousness—culminating in moksha, the fourth and final goal: liberation from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

Teach that, among humans, there are young souls and old souls.

Each soul is emanated from God, as a spark from a fire, and thus begins a spiritual journey which eventually leads it back to God. All human beings are on this journey, whether they realize it or not; and, of course, the journey spans many lives. One might ask if all are on the same journey, why then is there such a disparity among men? Clearly some act like saints and others act like sinners. Some take delight in helping their fellow man while others delight in harming him. The Hindu explanation is that each of us started the journey at a different time, and thus some are young souls, at the beginning of the spiritual path, while others are old souls, near the end. Our paramgurus, Jnanaguru Siva Yogaswami, in speaking to his devotees, described life as a school, with some in the M.A. class and others in kindergarten. Knowing the differences in spiritual maturity, he gave to each accordingly. Hindus do not condemn or exalt others as good but rather see all as divine beings, some young, some old and some in the intermediary stages. If children are taught this central Hindu principle, they will be able to understand and accept the otherwise confoundingly wide range of differences among people as part of God’s cosmic plan of spiritual evolution.

Teach about man’s threefold nature.

Man’s nature can be described as three-fold: spiritual, intellectual and instinctive. One or more of these aspects predominate uniquely in each of us according to our maturity and evolution. The spiritual nature is the pure, self-conscious, intuitive mind of the soul. The intellect is the thinking, reasoning nature. The instinctive nature is the animal-like nature which governs the physical body and brings forth strong desires and lower emotions such as anger, jealousy and fear. The goal is to learn to control these animal instincts as well as the ramifications of the intellect and the pride of the ego and manifest one’s spiritual nature. It is the instinctive nature in man that contains the tendencies to harm others, disregard the prudent laws of society and stir up negativity within the home, the nation and beyond. Those who are expressing such tendencies are young souls who have yet to learn why and how to harness the instinctive forces. It may take such a person many lives to rise to a higher consciousness and live in his spiritual nature. Thus the Hindu approach to such a man, which children can be taught from an early age, is not to label him as evil, but rather to focus on restraining his hurtfulness and helping him learn to control these instincts and improve his behavior.

Gurudeva describes this in an insightful way: “People act in evil ways who are not yet in touch with their soul nature and live to...
Instill in your children a pride in Hinduism based upon its wise precepts for living.

Since the middle of the twentieth century, Hindu teachings have become more widely understood throughout the world. As a result, cardinal aspects of the Hindu approach to living have been taken up by many thoughtful individuals of diverse religions and ethnicities far beyond India. This is because they find them to be wise and effective ways of living. Hindu precepts that are being universally adopted in the 21st century include:

- Following a vegetarian diet
- A reverence toward and desire to protect the environment
- Solving conflicts through nonviolent means
- Tolerance towards others
- Teaching that the whole world is one family
- The belief in karma as a system of divine justice
- The belief in reincarnation
- The practice of yoga and meditation
- Seeking to personally experience Divinity

Teach your children how the unique wisdom of their born faith, especially in the principles listed above, is being more appreciated, made a powerful state, unless it’s a potato.

More and more individuals are switching from the meat-eating diet of their parents to a vegetarian diet as a matter of conscience based upon their personal realization of the suffering that animals undergo when they are fettered and slaughtered. This is, of course, also the Hindu rationale for a vegetarian diet. It is based on the virtue of ahimsa: refraining from injuring, physically mentally or emotionally, anyone or any living creature. The Hindu who wishes to strictly follow the path of noninjury naturally adopts a vegetarian diet. A common saying that conveys this principle to even the smallest child is, “I won’t eat anything that has eyes, unless it’s a potato.”

A second rationale for vegetarianism has to do with our state of consciousness. When we eat meat, fish, fowl, and eggs, we absorb the vibration of these instinctive creatures into our nerve system. This chemically alters our consciousness and amplifies our own instinctive nature, which is the part of us prone to fear, anger, jealousy, confusion, resentment and the like. Therefore, being vegetarian is a great help in attaining and maintaining a spiritual state of consciousness, and some individuals take up vegetarianism for this reason alone.

A third rationale for vegetarianism is that it uses the planet’s natural resources in a much wiser way. In large measure, the escalating loss of species, destruction of ancient rain forests to create pasture lands for livestock, loss of topsoil and the consequent increase of water impurities and air pollution have all been traced to the single fact of meat in the human diet. No one decision that we can make as individuals as a race can have such a dramatic effect on the improvement of our planetary ecology as the decision not to eat meat. Many seeking to save the planet for future generations have taken up vegetarianism.

Hindus hold a deep reverence toward planet Earth and toward all living beings that dwell on it. Many thoughtful people share the Hindu view that it is not right for man to kill or harm animals for food or sport. They believe that animals have a right to enjoy living on this planet as much as humans do. There is a Vedic verse in this regard that says, “Ahimsa is not causing pain to any living being at any time through the actions of one’s mind, speech or body.” Another Vedic verse states, “You must not use your God-given body for killing God’s creatures, whether they be human, animal or insect.”

Hindus regard all living creatures as sacred—mammals, fishes, birds, and more. They are stewards of trees and plants, fish and birds, bees and reptiles, animals and creatures of every shape and kind. We acknowledge this reverence for life on our special affection for the cow. Mahatma Gandhi once said about the cow, “Cows can in no way be compared with men. cows are spiritual beings, and their progress by the way it treats its animals. Cow protection to me is no mere protection of the cow. It means protection of all that lives and is helpless and weak in the world. The cow means the entire subhuman world.”

Many individuals are concerned about our environment and properly conserving it for future generations. Hindus share this concern and honor and revere the world around them as God’s creation. They work for the protection of the Earth’s diversity and resources to achieve the goal of a secure, sustainable and lasting environment. Children today, as never before, have a native understanding of the place of mankind as part of the Earth, and it is our duty to reinforce this in their young minds.

Hinduism is respected for solving conflicts through nonviolent means. Mahatma Gandhi’s strong belief in the Hindu principle of ahimsa and his nonviolent methods for opposing British rule are well known throughout the world. The nonviolent approach has connected with us. Everyone who has used it will agree that it works. Certainly one of the best-known exponents of nonviolence was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Dr. King, after decades of careful thought on the problem of racial
Hinduism has great tolerance and considers the whole world to be a family. In the world of the twenty-first century, a prime concern is the many wars and clashes between peoples of different religions, nationalities and ethnicities based on hatred on one or both sides. The opposite of hatred is tolerance, and in that Hinduism excels. The Hindu belief that gives rise to tolerance of differences in race and nationality is that all of mankind is good, we are all divine beings, souls created by God. Therefore, we respect and embrace the entire human race. The Hindu practice of greeting one another with “namaskara,” worshiping God within the other person, is a way this philosophical truth is practiced on a daily basis. Hindus do not believe that some individuals will be saved and others damned, nor in a chosen people, nor in a starkly divided world of good and evil filled only with the faithful and the infidels. Hinduism respects and defends the rights of every caste, creed, color and sex, and it asks that those same rights be accorded to promote another.

In the second half of the twentieth century Hinduism not only gave them the hope that they can achieve their goal in this lifetime, but it gives them the practical tools, such as the disciplines of yoga and meditation, through which this goal eventually becomes a reality.

The focus of many religions is on helping those who do not believe in God to believe in God. Belief in God, in such faiths, is the beginning and the end of the process. Once you believe in God, you have the answer to everything. In Hinduism, belief is only the first step. Hindus want to move beyond believing in God to experiencing God. To the Hindu, belief is but a preparatory step to divine, daily-communion and life-transforming personal realization.

There is a classic story from the life of Swami Vivekananda, one of Hinduism’s best-known modern teachers, that illustrates the Hindu perspective of experiencing God. When Vivekananda was still a university student, he asked many of the foremost religious leaders in the Calcutta area where he lived if they had seen God. However, he never got a clear and authoritative answer from any of them. It is through the reactions it brings back into our lives the joys of divine blessings. Gurudeva outlined the ideal: “Hindu children are always treated with great respect and love, for one does not always know who they are. They may be incarnations of a grand- mother, grandfather, aunt or uncle, dearly beloved mother, sister, brother, respected father, a yogi or rishi returned to earth to help mankind spiritually. We must ask, ‘Who are these souls? What is their destiny in this life? How can I help them?’

Many people throughout the world firmly believe in karma and reincarnation. In the world happiness, success and religious fulfillment. The Vedantic verse that captures this sentiment is “May all people be happy.” By teaching our children this broad acceptance of peoples, even those who are very different from ourselves, we nurture in them a love for all and a compassionate tolerance that will serve them well throughout their lives.

Many people throughout the world firmly believe in karma and reincarnation. In the second half of the twentieth century Hinduism became more and more popular and influential in the West. For example, every year thousands of Westerners take up the belief in karma and reincarnation as a logical explanation of what we observe in life. A contemporary expression of the law of karma is “What goes around comes around.” Karma is the universal principle of cause and effect. Our actions, both good and bad, come back to us in the future, helping us to learn from life’s lessons and become better people. Reincarnation is the belief that the soul is immortal and takes birth time and time again. Through this process, we have experiences, learn lessons and evolve spiritually. Finally, we graduate from physical birth and continue learning and evolving on inner planes of consciousness without the need for a physical body until, ultimately, we merge in God. The belief in karma and reincarnation gives children a logical explanation to what otherwise may seem an unjust, indifferent or Godless world. They can be taught that challenging questions such as the meaning of life are being focused on benefiting the members of our family. We want them to be happy, successful and religiously fulfilled. And when we define family as the whole world, it is clear that we wish everyone in the world happiness, success and religious fulfillment. The Vedantic verse that captures this sentiment is “May all people be happy.” By teaching our children this broad acceptance of peoples, even those who are very different from ourselves, we nurture in them a love for all and a compassionate tolerance that will serve them well throughout their lives.

Belief in a single life makes it hard to reconcile such things, causing one to question how a just, benevolent God could allow to those who do not believe in God to believe in God. Belief in God, in such faiths, is the beginning and the end of the process. Once you believe in God, you have the answer to everything. In Hinduism, belief is only the first step. Hindus want to move beyond believing in God to experiencing God. To the Hindu, belief is but a preparatory step to divine, daily-communion and life-transforming personal realization. There is a classic story from the life of Swami Vivekananda, one of Hinduism’s best-known modern teachers, that illustrates the Hindu perspective of experiencing God. When Vivekananda was still a university student, he asked many of the foremost religious leaders in the Calcutta area where he lived if they had seen God. However, he never got a clear and authoritative answer from any of them. It is through the reactions it brings back into our lives the joys of divine blessings. Gurudeva outlined the ideal: “Hindu children are always treated with great respect and love, for one does not always know who they are. They may be incarnations of a grand-mother, grandfather, aunt or uncle, dearly beloved mother, sister, brother, respected father, a yogi or rishi returned to earth to help mankind spiritually. We must ask, ‘Who are these souls? What is their destiny in this life? How can I help them?’

Many people throughout the world firmly believe in karma and reincarnation. In the second half of the twentieth century Hinduism became more and more popular and influential in the West. For example, every year thousands of Westerners take up the belief in karma and reincarnation as a logical explanation of what we observe in life. A contemporary expression of the law of karma is “What goes around comes around.” Karma is the universal principle of cause and effect. Our actions, both good and bad, come back to us in the future, helping us to learn from life’s lessons and become better people. Reincarnation is the belief that the soul is immortal and takes birth time and time again. Through this process, we have experiences, learn lessons and evolve spiritually. Finally, we graduate from physical birth and continue learning and evolving on inner planes of consciousness without the need for a physical body until, ultimately, we merge in God. The belief in karma and reincarnation gives children a logical explanation to what otherwise may seem an unjust, indifferent or Godless world. They can be taught that challenging questions such as the meaning of life are being focused on benefiting the members of our family. We want them to be happy, successful and religiously fulfilled. And when we define family as the whole world, it is clear that we wish everyone in the world happiness, success and religious fulfillment. The Vedantic verse that captures this sentiment is “May all people be happy.” By teaching our children this broad acceptance of peoples, even those who are very different from ourselves, we nurture in them a love for all and a compassionate tolerance that will serve them well throughout their lives.

Belief in a single life makes it hard to reconcile such things, causing one to question how a just, benevolent God could allow to those who do not believe in God to believe in God. Belief in God, in such faiths, is the beginning and the end of the process. Once you believe in God, you have the answer to everything. In Hinduism, belief is only the first step. Hindus want to move beyond believing in God to experiencing God. To the Hindu, belief is but a preparatory step to divine, daily-communion and life-transforming personal realization. There is a classic story from the life of Swami Vivekananda, one of Hinduism’s best-known modern teachers, that illustrates the Hindu perspective of experiencing God. When Vivekananda was still a university student, he asked many of the foremost religious leaders in the Calcutta area where he lived if they had seen God. However, he never got a clear and authoritative answer from any of them. It is through the reactions it brings back into our lives the joys of divine blessings. Gurudeva outlined the ideal: “Hindu children are always treated with great respect and love, for one does not always know who they are. They may be incarnations of a grand-mother, grandfather, aunt or uncle, dearly beloved mother, sister, brother, respected father, a yogi or rishi returned to earth to help mankind spiritually. We must ask, ‘Who are these souls? What is their destiny in this life? How can I help them?’
Teach about the Vedic statement “Truth is One, sages describe it variously.”

Hinduism is often misunderstood as being polytheistic, worshiping many gods, none of which is supreme. It is important to correct this misconception in the minds of children. They can be taught that Hindus revere the great beings of light, called Mahadevas, just as the Catholics honor the Archangels of Heaven. But Hindus all worship the one Supreme Being, known in the various denominations by different names. Even more than that, Hindus believe that the immanent-transcendent Lord they worship is indeed the same God worshiped by all peoples of all faiths and religions of the world. As a country only one king, we can school the young ones, so the universe has only one Supreme Being. The oneness of God is easily understood when we see that the different religions are various names to describe the same “Truth.” Teaching this to our young ones resolves many misconceptions, both within Hinduism itself and between Hinduism and the varied faiths of the world.

One of them until he met Sri Ramakrishna. During his second meeting with Sri Ramakrishna he asked the great sage, “Sir, have you seen God?” Calmly Sri Ramakrishna replied, “Yes, I see Him as clearly as one sees an apple in the palm of the hand, nay, even more intently. And not only this, you can also see Him.” This deeply impressed the young Vivekananda, who soon after accepted Sri Ramakrishna as his guru.

By teaching children about Hinduism’s stress on personal Godly experience, we set them on a path of self-understanding, self-reflection and discovery of the Divine that does not rely on the beliefs or reports of others. This gives them an appreciation of each step in life—be it pleasant or unpleasant—as an integral part of a joyful spiritual journey.

Teach the correct meaning of the Vedic statement “Truth is One, paths are many.”

Some Hindus teach their children that all religions are one, thinking this is a way to describe Sanatana Dharma’s broad vision. However, this is a problematic distortion of the Hindu belief that truth is one, paths are many. Teaching this to children will cause them to be half-hearted Hindus, never fully committed to their faith and not inspired to pass it on to their offspring. I have seen this attitude create indifferent Hindus who passively attend their non-Hindu spouse’s church, presumptuously trying to be half-hearted members of both. They are truly matter, and who think it is best to raise their children “in both religions.”

The correct teaching is that Hindus believe that all religions worship the same truth, the same Supreme Being. However, this does not mean that all religions are identical and it doesn’t matter which religion you follow. The beliefs and practices of the world religions are, in fact, quite different. The God they worship is one, but each of the many paths is quite distinct. This knowledge will help children see the world’s array of faiths in a realistic light while pursuing their Hindu path with full dedication.

Hindus believe that all of the major world religions are valid paths and everyone is well placed in their chosen faith. Hindus do not proselytize, meaning they do not try to convert members of other religions to Hinduism. Proselytizing is based upon the belief that one’s religion is the only true religion and therefore everyone in another religion is not inspired to pass it on to their offspring. I have seen this attitude create indifferent Hindus who passively attend their non-Hindu spouse’s church, presumptuously trying to be half-hearted members of both. They are truly matter, and who think it is best to raise their children “in both religions.”

Prejudice-free consciousness manifests when we see God in everyone and embrace differences of ethnic background and religion. Are we born with the prejudice? Absolutely not! These are all learned, at home, at school and elsewhere. How is a prejudice-free consciousness developed? It is through teaching personal experiences, the teachings of the world, our experience, and all human beings are divine beings. It is through complete avoidance of remarks that are disrespectful, and not subscribing to the objection that some religions are expected to be born a Hindu to be a Hindu. When asked by a devotee about this idea, Swami Vivekananda resounded “Why, born aliens have been converted in the past by crowds, and the process is still going on.”

Hinduism has advanced practices within it that many religions do not have. If you simply want to live a virtuous, pious life and be part of a community of fellow believers, you will discover that all religions are similar at that basic level. But if you have the desire to personally experience God, you will only find the advanced practices that lead to that divine experience in a few religions. A good example of this fact has been occurring in Catholic monasteries for decades. Hinduism has advanced practices within it that many religions do not have. If you simply want to live a virtuous, pious life and be part of a community of fellow believers, you will discover that all religions are similar at that basic level. But if you have the desire to personally experience God, you will only find the advanced practices that lead to that divine experience in a few religions. A good example of this fact has been occurring in Catholic monasteries for decades.

Parental closeness finds fulfillment when children reach adulthood and choose to spend time with their parents because they really enjoy being with them. A strong bond of love and understanding exists. Sadly, the opposite is often the case. How then is parental closeness developed? It is through experiencing love by hugging and saying often the three magic words “I love you.” Distance is developed by never expressing loving. Closeness is nurtured by correcting a child’s mistakes through positive discipline methods, such as time-out and appropriate, natural and logical consequences. The use of physical violence, anger, irrational punishments, blame and shame cause distance. Closeness comes when quality time is spent together in activities that all members of the family enjoy. It is developed by the father’s binding with his son and the mother’s binding with her daughters, through developing common interests in hobbies or games and working on them together. It is protected when parents create in the home a nonthreatening atmosphere of love in which their children feel free to tell themselves everything they have done without fear of the consequences. They know their parents love them, no matter what. A loving parental closeness is powerfully reflected in all subsequent relationships children develop, even their relationship with God.

Prejudice-free consciousness manifests when we see God in everyone and embrace differences of ethnic background and religion. Are we born with the prejudice? Absolutely not! These are all learned, at home, at school and elsewhere. How is a prejudice-free consciousness developed? It is through teaching personal experiences, the teachings of the world, our experience, and all human beings are divine beings. It is through complete avoidance of remarks that are disrespectful, and not subscribing to the objection that some religions are expected to be born a Hindu to be a Hindu. When asked by a devotee about this idea, Swami Vivekananda resounded “Why, born aliens have been converted in the past by crowds, and the process is still going on.”

Hinduism has advanced practices within it that many religions do not have. If you simply want to live a virtuous, pious life and be part of a community of fellow believers, you will discover that all religions are similar at that basic level. But if you have the desire to personally experience God, you will only find the advanced practices that lead to that divine experience in a few religions. A good example of this fact has been occurring in Catholic monasteries for decades.

Hinduism has advanced practices within it that many religions do not have. If you simply want to live a virtuous, pious life and be part of a community of fellow believers, you will discover that all religions are similar at that basic level. But if you have the desire to personally experience God, you will only find the advanced practices that lead to that divine experience in a few religions. A good example of this fact has been occurring in Catholic monasteries for decades.
sonal computers, some are minicomputers, others are mainframe computers, but Hinduism is a supercomputer.

Belief in God is only the first step in Hinduism. Beyond that, it offers four ways to personally experience God. The first two ways involve seeing the Divine in other people.

In some religions the ultimate experience offered is to have a strong belief in the existence of God. In Hinduism, however, believing in God is only a preliminary, though important, step toward an ever-deepening personal experience of God’s presence. Perhaps the easiest place to start is to see God in great religious teachers. We feel a spiritual aura about them that is different, uplifting and inspiring. We see a light in their eyes and feel a love in their presence—we do not find in others. The second way to experience God is to look deeply into the eyes of another person. Look beyond his or her personality, deeper than the intellect, and see the individual’s pure life energy as God. In Hindu culture we have an opportunity every time we greet other people through the traditional gesture of namaskara to practice looking deeply enough into their eyes to see God within them as the Life of their life. This practice is an excellent way for children to learn that all people are divine beings.

The third and fourth ways we can experience God are through temple worship and meditation.

The third way to see God is through the Deity’s image in the Hindu temple. This is the devotional, or theistic, approach. Gods and devas are represented in images that we worship. These images are the physical body they use during temple ceremonies. Though occasionally a devotee may have a vision of the God, the more common way we experience the Gods and devas is as an uplifting, peaceful, divine energy, or shakti, that radiates out from the image. It is easier to feel their blessings at the high point of the paja when the flame is held high. If taught the joys of temple worship while children, toddlers will develop a devotional relationship with the Deities which will strengthen and guide them throughout life.

The fourth way to see God is in meditation, which is a form of internal worship. This is the monistic, or unitive, approach to experiencing God—going deeply enough into our inner consciousness to find the essence of our soul, which is identical with God. In meditation we first experience God as peaceful, blissful energies and feelings, later as a brilliant, clear white light and later still as truth, consciousness and bliss, called Sachchidanianda, which permeates the heart and consciousness, our true self, and is the absolute and transcendent reality that is timeless, formless and spaceless. In Hinduism, this is regarded as the summit of all knowing, the highest spiritual attainment which leads to moksha, spiritual liberation.

Children can be taught the basics of meditation at an early age, including sitting up straight, regulating the breath and performing hatha yoga to quiet the mental and physical energies. These practices will help them remain centered, and they will mature naturally into deeper inner experiences as they grow up.

Hinduism focuses on personal, spiritual transformation through the regular practice of disciplines, called sadhana. Reading spiritual books is certainly part of progressing on the Hindu path. However, much more important is the regular practice of religious disciplines. Our emotional, intellectual and spiritual natures are all significantly enhanced and developed through performing such disciplines regularly over a period of many years. The more consistently we practice, the greater the speed of our spiritual growth.

Service, also called karma yoga or seva, refers to religious service given without the least thought of reward, which has the magical effect of softening the ego and bringing forth the souls innate devotion. An example of serving others is in temple service. This includes performing one’s duty to family and community, such as performing simple chores at the temple, such as sweeping the floors or polishing the brass. Another form of seva is holding religious feedings at a temple once a month. Children love to be helpful and can be encouraged to find religious expressions of this urge.

Children make mistakes not because they are bad, but because they lack knowledge or training. For all of mankind, no matter where one is on the path, spiritual advancement comes from improving one’s behavior. We do this by learning from our failures as much as from our successes. Unfortunately, this process is often inhibited by the idea that somehow we are not supposed to err. We grow up being scolded for our mistakes by our parents. Some teachers ridicule and beat students when they make mistakes. Supervisors yell at workers when they make a mistake. No wonder many adults feel terrible when they make a mistake. Therefore, to spiritually benefit from our mistakes, we need a new attitude toward them which opens the door for making needed improvements. We can view them instead as wonderful opportunities to learn. In disciplining our children, it is important to focus on finding out what lack of knowledge or necessary training caused their misbehavior and then providing them with the needed guidance. This process can be understood in the light of desire, action and wisdom. We desire that our children behave well, but if our actions in correcting them create fear, resentment or feelings of inferiority, then they will not improve and we will have defeated our goal. By teaching a child’s errant behavior as described above, we discover our own wisdom in handling kids, and we help them grow to a healthy maturity, equipped to guide their own children with love and wisdom.

Focus on solutions instead of punishment.

For some parents, disciplining their children for misbehavior is simply a matter of punishment. But discipline means “to teach,” so punishment misses the point if it is not accompanied by taking a moment to gently teach and kindly help the child, to encourage, uplift and inspire. In many cases the child who erred simply does not know or understand something. Otherwise he never would have made the mistake. There is some knowledge the child is missing, and thoughtful parents need to figure out what that knowledge is and teach it to the child in a way that he or she can grasp and remember. This is a far more time-consuming process than a swift slap on the behind, but leads to far more permanent and positive results.

There are better forms of discipline than corporal punishment and verbal abuse.

When children seriously misbehave, punishment, of course, needs to be part of the response. There are many forms of corporal or physical punishment including yelling, hitting, pinching, using harsh or angry words. These all cause the child to become resentful and fearful, and in this state of mind he is unable and unwilling to focus on the lesson the parent intends to provide. Such punishments inevitably create a distance between parent and child and lower the child’s sense of self-worth. On the other hand, the alternative forms of punishment—loving, positive strategies, such as time-out, logical consequences and denial of privileges—are more effective and conducive to the child’s learning the lesson from this experience, cooperating with the parents in a wholesome way and not repeating the behavior again.
Devotion is the third category. Devotion, or bhakti yoga, centers around regularly worshiping the Deity at the temple and inwardly striving to awaken a profound love of God in our hearts, soften our intellect and develop a deep devotion to God. This can be as simple as bringing a flower to the shrine each morning before school. Kids love the Gods, especially Lord Ganesh, and they can, even as toddlers, be taught to hold hands in namaskara, prostrate at the shrine and learn songs and chants in praise of their favorite Deity.

Meditation is the fourth category. Meditation is also called raja yoga, or ashtanga yoga as it consists of attention and concentration. When they are more mature, you can take them to a swami or yoga teacher to learn the deeper aspects

Teach children that the world is a positive place filled with opportunities for growth. The world in this sense refers to the arena of life, including where we interact with people the most, such as in the home, school and our place of work. In Western thought these are not considered spiritual places. However, in Hinduism they are. There is no sharp distinction between the sacred and the secular. In the words of Paramahansa Yogananda, "The world is an ashram—a training ground for the achievement of moksha."

What is it that transforms the world from a secular place into a spiritual one? It is the understanding that it is through the process of experiencing life that we unfold spiritually. It is the knowing that through fulfilling our natural duties, honestly and to the best of our ability, we make spiritual progress. Why? Through interacting with others, we learn important lessons and, as a result, gradually deepen our understanding, improve our behavior and become more spiritual. In the process, we work through our past karmas created in the past and create new karmas to be faced in the future. Our daily activities, encounters and emotional reactions contribute to our spiritual progress just as much as attending puja in the temple, studying the holy texts, meditating and worshiping in our home shrine. Paramahansa Yogananda captured the essence of this perspective when he said, "All work must be done with the aim of reaching God."

Teach that life is a classroom in which we learn important lessons. Life is in process of learning, teaching action and error and thereby advancing spiritually. Gurudeva has an insightful explanation of this process: "Life is a series of experiences, one after another. Each experience can be looked at as a classroom in the big university of life if we only approach it that way. Who is going to these classrooms? Who is the member of this university of life? It's not your instinctive mind. It's not your intellectual mind. It's the body of your soul, your superconscious self, that wonderful body of light. It's maturing under the stress and strain." Children live much of their day learning, often in a classroom, so the idea that all of life is a school for our soul will come easily to them, and it will teach them to value lessons wherever they come from.

Teach about the three great powers: desire, action and wisdom. Important insights into the soul's maturing process can be gained by looking at the three shaktis of God—iccha, the power of desire, kriya, the power of action and jnana, the power of wisdom—which are also the three powers of the soul. We first have a desire, and then an action. And if it is strong enough we act. In young souls the action may be ill-conceived and wrongful, or adharima, lacking in wisdom. For example, we want a computer, so we steal one. We need money, so we borrow with no intention to repay. The soul is repeating a cycle of similar experiences, many times, we learn forth from desire to action, desire to action.

In the case of the adharima action of stealing, our first step is to bring the lesson to light, that theft is not the best way to get what we need or want. This may come from the difficult experience of being caught, or by seeing the suffering our actions cause in others. Such learning is the jnana shakti, soulful wisdom, coming forth and causing one's behavior to improve. This process works for virtues, or dharima, actions as well. For example, we volunteer at the temple to teach children's classes once a month. We are uplifted by the feeling that helping others gives us and decide to help out every week and even participate in meetings to plan out the classes. Selfless action and the reaction it has on us brings an inner joy. Therefore, jnana guides us to decide to undertake even more service and thus feel more joyful. We have again improved our behavior. If children are taught about these three basic forces at work in their life, they will seek to understand desire, think about action and strive for wisdom.

Teach children how they can wisely respond to their mistakes through a four-step process. The most common first reaction to making a mistake is to become upset, get emotional about it, or if it is a serious mistake, feel terribly burdened and even depressed. That is a natural first reaction, but if it is our only reaction, it is not enough. We need to cope with the emotional reaction to the action and move on to the second step, which is the learning stage.

A good second step to resolving a mistake is to think clearly about what happened and why, and find a way not to repeat the same error in the future. Perhaps we were not being careful enough, and resolving to be more careful next time will prevent the problem from recurring. Perhaps we have hurt someone's feelings. This might make us think things through. But with the additional knowledge learned from our blunder we can resolve to do better the next time a similar situation arises. Perhaps we created unintended negative consequences for ourselves or others. Now that we are aware of these consequences, we certainly want to think that path again. Recently a group of chil-