

MODERN PROBLEMS AND ANCIENT SOLUTIONS

SWAMI HARSHANANDA

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For Whom is this Brochure Meant

It is meant for YOU, especially if you are a youth! You are young, educated, intelligent and sensitive. That is why you can recognize the problems you are facing. That is why you feel hurt easily. So, if you can manage to muster a little patience to read this little booklet, it will help you immensely. In your daily life you manage to find some time for so many things, some of which at least, are useless and you regret about them. So, can you not set apart just thirty minutes for this little thing, that can do you great good? TRY!

S. H.

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1. Life is Full of Problems

Life is full of problems. None is free from them except two: the perfect being who has transcended them and the absolute idiot who cannot even understand them! All other human beings in between, at various levels of evolution, are beset with them. And, ironically, our modern world, notwithstanding all the progress we have made in science and technology, in spite of raising our civilization to higher levels, has also multiplied them. If lack of basic amenities of life worries certain segments of the world society, a surfeit of them is threatening life on earth itself in other sections. Problems and worries beget tensions. Tensions adversely affect the individuals, often forcing them to react more

adversely. Natural and legitimate ambitions of life, coupled with inexperience, make the youth particularly susceptible to these tensions. Smoking, alcoholism, drugs, sex-orgies and violent outbursts are just symptoms of a sick mind. Hence all human problems including those of the youth who are *part of the human society*, have to be tackled at a more fundamental level and a more fundamental solution has to be discovered.

2. The Fundamental Solution

This is exactly what the Rishis of yore (the seers of India who rediscovered Sanatana Dharma, the 'Eternal Religion,' popularly called 'Hinduism' and propagated it) have done. A fundamental solution has got to be true and valid *for all time*. Their solution is: DEEP FAITH IN GOD, and

cultivation of the concomitant virtues. If we want to lift a load, we should first stand on a firm base which will not collapse or yield under the weight of the load in the process of lifting it. Deep faith in God provides us with such a firm base, stationed in which we can successfully tackle all our problems.

This solution is neither ludicrous nor 'ostrichism' camouflaged in an attractive language. Life is serious business. So are its problems. So should be the solutions too. And, this remedy has been tested over the millennia and found to work. Why not then, give it a fair chance?

3. Hindu Concept of God is Perfectly Rational

One thing must be made clear at the

very outset: The Hindu concept of God is perfectly rational. The God of Hinduism is neither the 'opium of the masses' nor an extra-cosmic Being. He is the supremely intelligent Power that evolves this universe out of Himself, sustains it and then dissolves it back into Himself. In the ultimate analysis, this whole universe is identical with Him. Modern scientific research is slowly tending towards the fundamental unity of the whole creation. Particle physics has brought us to the borderland of metaphysics. Hence we assert that this Hindu concept of God is perfectly rational.

Again, this God is not only an intelligent Power but also a Personality, endowed with all the virtues that we can ever imagine, to an unimaginable extent. It is this that makes Him extremely dear

to the human heart. This we learn from our Vedas, Upanishads and Gita, the 'textbooks' of our religion. Belief in them is a must even as a tyro venturing into the field of the study of physical sciences has got to believe in all that a standard textbook of that subject says.

4. Can Belief in God Help Us Solve Our Problems?

But how on earth can this belief in God help us to solve the problems of our life? Well! To solve our problems we need two basic things: Wisdom that discovers the right solutions and the strength to implement them. We get both these and much more if we have the faith in God and pray to Him sincerely. Then, just as the electrical energy from the generating

station flows into our bulb when the switch is put on, or, the water of the town reservoir flows into our bucket when the tap is turned on, even so, great wisdom and tremendous strength will flow into us by faith and prayer enabling us to tackle our problems effectively. The beauty is that the Divine inflow is directly proportional to the intensity of prayer and faith!

5. Hinduism Does Not Make You Otherworldly

Let there be no apprehension that Hinduism makes one otherworldly and results in neglecting the life here and now. The system of the 'Four Goals of Life' (the 'purusharthas') that it has offered is unique in the socio-religious history of the world. No human being is debarred from enjoying

the legitimate pleasure of life brought about by wealth ('Artha') and natural appetites('Kama'). But this has to be done according to the principle called 'Dharma', the principle of righteousness and justice, which always keeps the good of the others in purview while enjoying oneself. When this is scrupulously followed it will gradually lead one to Beatitude, called Moksha. More of it later.

6. What is Dharma?

This word 'Dharma'—the very foundation of all the purusharthas—means 'that which sustains all'. So in its very essence, it signifies God Himself. But more commonly it denotes the Law of God that operates both at the cosmic and at the socio-individual level, the former being

christened as 'Rita' and the latter as 'Dharma.' Rita holds the various elements of creation together and regulates their movement and interaction.

Dharma is a derivative of Rita to be applied at the individual and social level so that the individual is sustained in his quest for perfection and the society creates the right atmosphere for the same. This has resulted in the wonderful twin-systems of 'Ashrama' and 'Varna'.

7. Stages of Life

The Ashrama scheme leads the individual gradually through four stages of life, each stage having an inbuilt system of training for that stage and preparing the ground for the next. The training given during Brahmacharya, the first stage, helps

him to gain not only intellectual knowledge but also inculcates in him the essential moral and spiritual values, of which self-mastery forms the bedrock as it were. This helps him to glide safely into Garhas-thya, the married state or the state of the householder, where self-mastery is as essential as the obligation to raise and maintain a family. In this stage, he is expected not only to lead a decent and economically independent life but also discharge his various obligations to the society as a whole. Relentless practice of the spiritual exercises learnt during the first stage of life, as also the variegated experiences of life help the householder to develop enough maturity and detachment by the time he reaches the end of that stage so that he can renounce his hearth

and home and retire to the forest. This is called Vanaprastha, the state of the forest recluse. Development of further detachment and more intense spiritual yearning will embolden him to embark upon the life of a Sannyasin or a mendicant wherein he will try his best to attain spiritual illumination, untrammelled by the duties and responsibilities of normal life.

Of course, in the modern times, only the first two stages remain and that too in a metamorphosed or even distorted state, the fourth state being a rare option.

8. Social Order

Evolution of the individual in his quest for perfection becomes easy and smooth if the society can create conditions conducive to it. It is here that the Varna system

stepped in, providing the bulwark for social stability. The system supplied the basis for a natural division of labour according to one's disposition and nurture. Those who engaged themselves in the acquisition and propagation of knowledge, and practised 'simple living and high thinking' became the Brahmanas. They became the Kshatriyas who took upon themselves the difficult task of protecting the society from external aggression, maintaining internal law and order and, administering justice. Others who were responsible for producing and distributing wealth and goods including agricultural commodities were called Vaishyas. Still others who provided the society with physical labour came to be known as Shudras.

This Varna system, in course of time,

got transformed into the 'Jati' system, the system of multiple castes and groups, based almost entirely on vocations which were invariably hereditary.

In the modern context where practically every vocation is thrown open to everybody, the Jati system—which again, let it be noted, has nothing to do with Hindu religion as such—has become irrelevant. The Varna system, whether one concedes it or not, is still there, though in a metamorphosed form, since it is a natural division of all societies into certain archetypes, based upon personal qualities and professions chosen.

9. The 'Instant Pill' for Solving Our Problems

One may aver that all this is a digression aimed at diverting the attention

from the central question with which we started. It is not so. Such 'digressions' are necessary to clear many wrong ideas and preconceived notions that cloud our understanding of our own religion and culture.

Now, coming to brass tacks as it were, do our Holy Books give us some simple practical instructions, some 'Instant Pills' for solving our problems? Yes, certainly! The very first piece of advice that a Vedic teacher has given to his student returning home after graduation is this: *Satyam vada; Dharmam chara*. 'Speak the truth. Act according to Dharma.' This advice rendered over five thousand years ago, is valid even today.

Our 'modern heroes,' born and brought up in an atmosphere of lies and knavery,

are apt to laugh at this as simply ridiculous. *But it is often the ridiculously simple things that are the greatest truths!*

10. Why Truth?

Now-a-days, even children (who have been well-trained in this 'art' by their parents and elders whether knowingly or unwittingly) put this simple question: Why should we speak the truth and block our progress? Is not the whole world thriving on untruth and dishonesty?

The reply of the philosopher-mystic that speaking untruth will block our spiritual progress because Truth is our very essence, may cut no ice with the present-day intelligentsia. They are intelligent enough to understand that those who preach big often act small. Even if they act up to

their precepts, it has failed to generate any conviction in their hearts about the truth of such statements.

Let us tackle it at the pragmatic level. Suppose, for argument's sake, everybody starts telling lies to everyone else about everything: A doctor tells lies to his patient about the disease and prescribes the wrong medicine. The druggist deliberately gives something else, may be, a poisonous substance! A teacher teaches absolute nonsense about a subject to the school children. A wife gives a false telegram to her husband who is away on a long journey. What would be the result? Absolute CHAOS! So we see where the shoe pinches! We would perhaps behead all these people—if it were in our hands—for having told us lies and putting us into lots of difficulties!

Have we not, thus automatically conceded the greatness of truth? Should we not, then, put ourselves into the "other man's position" and try to imagine the dire consequences before we dare to tell a lie?

Again, one cannot say that one can tell a lie or the truth as it suits one. You cannot declare that fire does not burn, then, keep the hand in fire and expect not to be burnt!

So, if truth has to be recognized as very essential even for our day-to-day life, how much more should it be so, when viewed from the perspective of the totality of our life! Such words spoken by the Rishis of yore out of the fulness of their wisdom and which have been well-tested over the millennia by generation after generation, can be ignored only at our peril.

11. Three Principles of Life

Let us now turn our attention to the second dictum: *Dharmam chara*, 'Act according to Dharma'. The word Dharma here has to be interpreted in its derivative sense as applied to the individual but affecting the society too. Out of the several rules and regulations given by our Rishis, three—which we prefer to call as 'the Principles of Life'—may be specifically dealt with here. They have immense potentiality for solving the problems of our modern society which seems to have developed a knack for muddling up things by creating more problems for every one it solves.

Universal love implied by the words 'ahimsa' (nonviolence) and 'daya' (compassion) is the first principle of life. This is the best and the safest antidote for hatred.

Hatred breeds more hatred. Violence begets more violence. Just as fire cannot be quenched by another fire but by water, even so, hatred can be nullified only by love.

In these days of fantastic transportation facilities as also mass communication systems when the world has physically shrunk as it were, it is rather strange that violence among people and wars among nations have steadily been increasing. Perhaps, it is not so strange, since, as the saying goes, wars are born in the minds of men!

We—everyone of us without exception—want that we be loved and cared for, and not hated and oppressed. If we are really serious about it, we should take the first step in this direction by sincerely trying

to love others and eliminate all hatred and illwill from within us. This will gradually build up a wonderful aura of peace around us influencing those that come within its perimeters. This is a fact and not a fiction. Hundreds of people who have had the privilege of coming into contact with great persons like Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda or Ramana Maharshi have testified it.

Controlling and eliminating greed, as implied by the words 'asteya' (non-stealing) and 'aparigraha' (non-acceptance of gifts) and practising contentment is the second principle. Most of the economic ills of our society are basically due to greed—whether practised by individuals or groups or countries. Not only poverty affecting millions of people but also upsetting the

ecological balance by the discharge of industrial waste-products into water and air which kill and maim even the innocent beings of the animal kingdom, is also *the direct result of the greed of man*. Hence if we can practise the virtues of not laying our hands upon what does not belong to us and not accumulating things more than what we *really need*, and keep an eye on our greed so that we do not exploit either nature or other beings for our selfish purposes, the kingdom of heaven will descend here and now! At least as an experiment, practise contentment and see its marvellous effects upon yourself.

And, last but not the least, is the third principle, the principle of control of passions, especially of lust, as signified by the word 'brahmacharya' (chastity or continence). If

the fire which ought to be confined to the oven in the house, gets uncontrolled freedom, it will reduce the house itself to ashes in no time. Similarly, if lust, a basic instinct meant for the reproduction of the species, is given an unbridled expression *it will destroy the race!* Spread of venereal diseases, forced abortions endangering life, glut of unwanted children leading to juvenile delinquency and formation of criminal gangs or sex-crimes and violence—these are only the tip of the iceberg. *Destroying the individual's personality and the vitality of the race—this is the biggest danger that it creates!*

Has anyone heard of venereal diseases among dogs or juvenile delinquency among kittens? Why not take a lesson or two from the animal kingdom?

If this has to be achieved, the modern human society has got to reorient its way of life. To use the analogy already given, one cannot keep the hand in fire and then complain that it burns! If the entire audio-visual system upgraded by the latest developments in science and technology, is applied unremittingly to downgrade the human beings by always catering to the crass and base animal passions, God only can save the society! Or, perhaps, He may find it too rotten to set it right and prefer the easier way—that of destroying it altogether and build it anew! And being intelligent enough, He may allow us to destroy ourselves mutually so that He does not get the blame! Be that as it may, humanity, in its own best interest, must return to a saner sex order, based upon

the original purpose of this most powerful natural instinct.

12. The Ultimate Solution

It is necessary to mention here that Hinduism has offered one ultimate solution for *all* the problems of life: Moksha. Since all our problems are rooted in the body-mind complex, transcending this is the ultimate solution. This will result not only in the freedom from sorrow and suffering but in positive bliss. Yoga is the method recommended for its attainment.

13. Practical Hints

Keeping this Hindu philosophy of life as the basis, let us now deduce some practical disciplines to be followed in daily life:

(1) Keep the body fit through proper food and exercise. Suryanamaskars and Yogasanas are excellent aids in this regard. Avoid all excesses. Let there be moderation whether in eating, sleeping or sense pleasures or work and exercise.

(2) Try to acquire enough professional skill and competence. But too much of it, that may cut into other legitimate fields of life should be avoided. Resist the temptation to earn more money than is really needed to lead a decent and peaceful life and provide for future emergencies. Also try to help others to the best possible extent.

(3) Cultivate the intellect by studying a bit of philosophy, logic or social sciences. But, remember that the dictum 'Too much

is too bad' holds good here also. Dry logic and philosophy often prove counter-productive by destroying faith in God.

(4) Try to develop a sense of art-appreciation, a little capacity to enjoy good music, dance or drama or paintings, especially of the classical types. Since such art should really elevate us to higher aesthetic experience leading to spiritual evolution, those of the moribund types that degrade our minds should be ruthlessly avoided.

(5) Practice of prayer and meditation, twice a day, at dawn and dusk, is a must. The simplest method could be something like this:

Sit cross-legged, keeping the backbone and the head erect. Close the eyes. Imagine a brilliant orb of light. Inside that, imagine

the living and conscious form of any deity of the Hindu pantheon that appeals to you most. Do not, however, forget that the supreme God behind them all is absolutely the same, though the names and forms of these deities appear to be different. Pray to that Deity for the good things of life especially for those virtues that make for moral and spiritual progress. Then, repeat the name of that Deity at least 108 times, trying to meditate also on the form, at the same time. Close this whole process with a simple worship with flowers and incense, offered mentally or to the image or picture of that Deity kept in your shrine.

Repetition of the famous Gayatri Mantra of the Vedas, after learning of it from competent elders, may also be adopted in the place of the name of the Deity.

(6) Try to practise consciously the three principles of life already mentioned: universal love and compassion; contentment and absence of greed; and, control of passions. A few minutes should be devoted in the night before going to bed everyday, to review that day's progress. Never mind the failures. Try and try again. Begin the next day with a firm resolve to do better. Also, put this thought frequently into your mind: 'I am becoming better and better, in all respects, day by day!'

14. Conclusion

All this is not a good dame's goody goody advice. How good it really is can be known only when you take it seriously and practise it.

You cannot change the world overnight. But if you try sincerely **YOU CAN CHANGE YOURSELF FOR THE BETTER**. Then you will realise that the world is also slowly improving! So, *start with yourself first*. Also, try to influence the members of your family and the circle of your intimate friends if you can.

Will you?



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