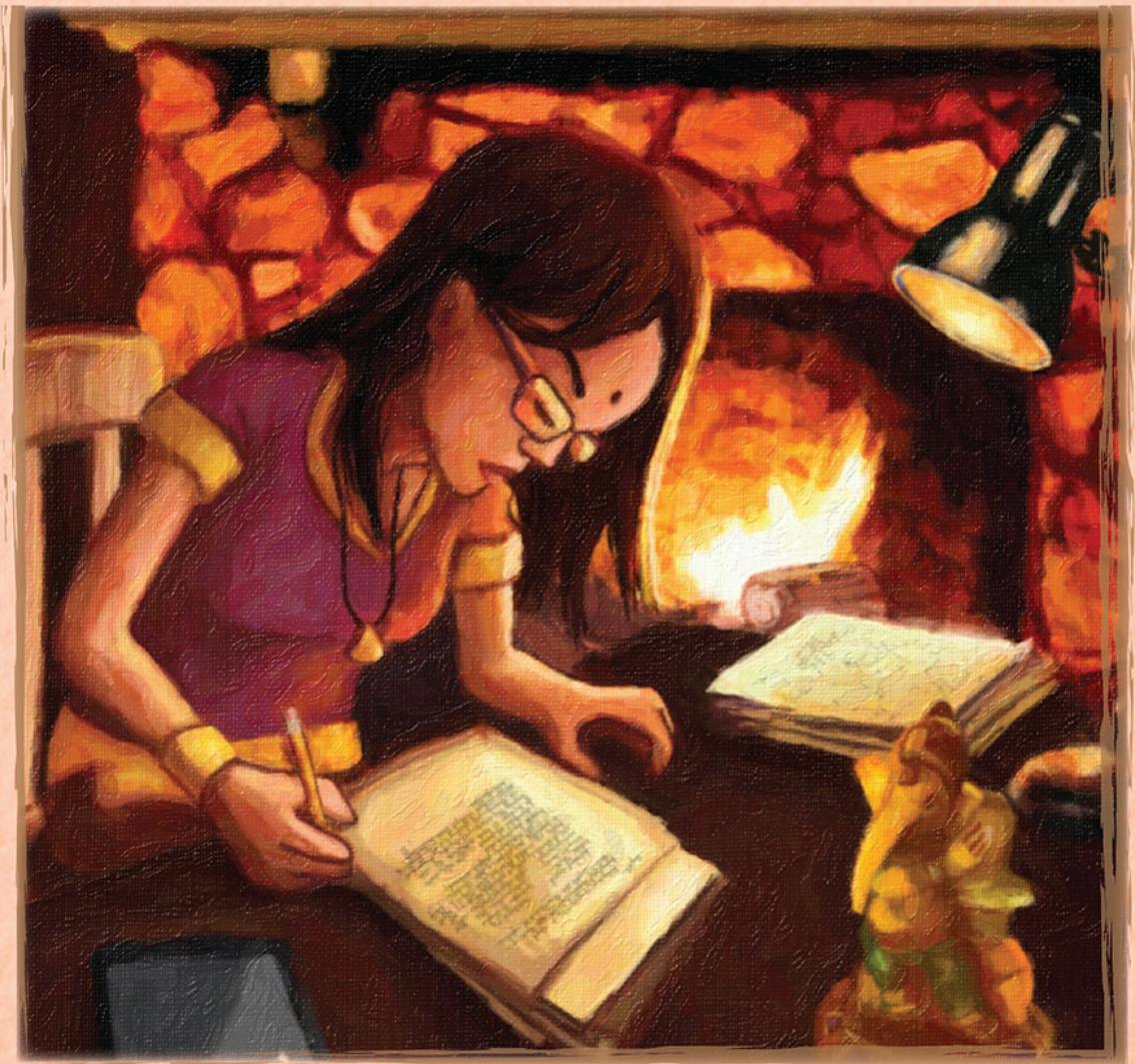


MODERN STORIES FOR HINDU YOUTH: BOOK TWO

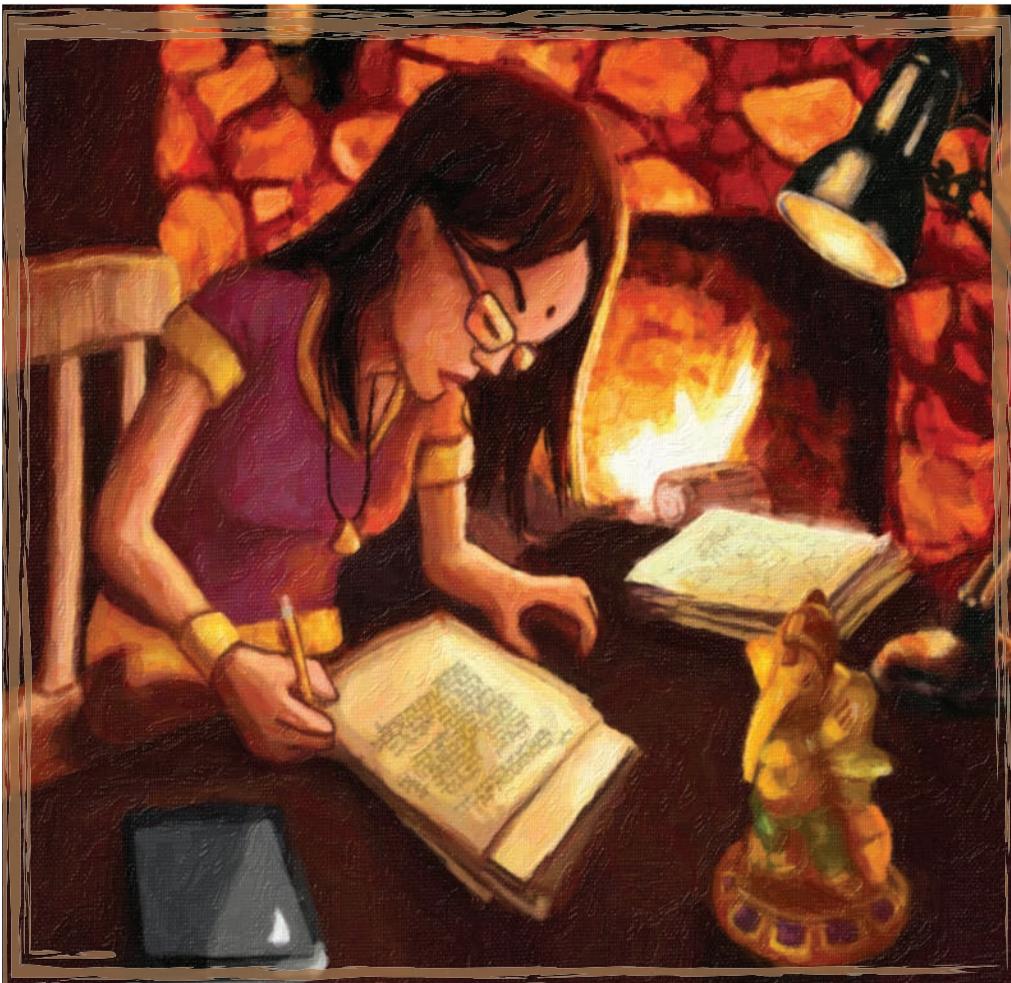
# Life Skills For Hindu Teens



By Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami

MODERN STORIES FOR HINDU YOUTH: BOOK TWO

# Life Skills for Hindu Teens



First Edition

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**Himalayan Academy**

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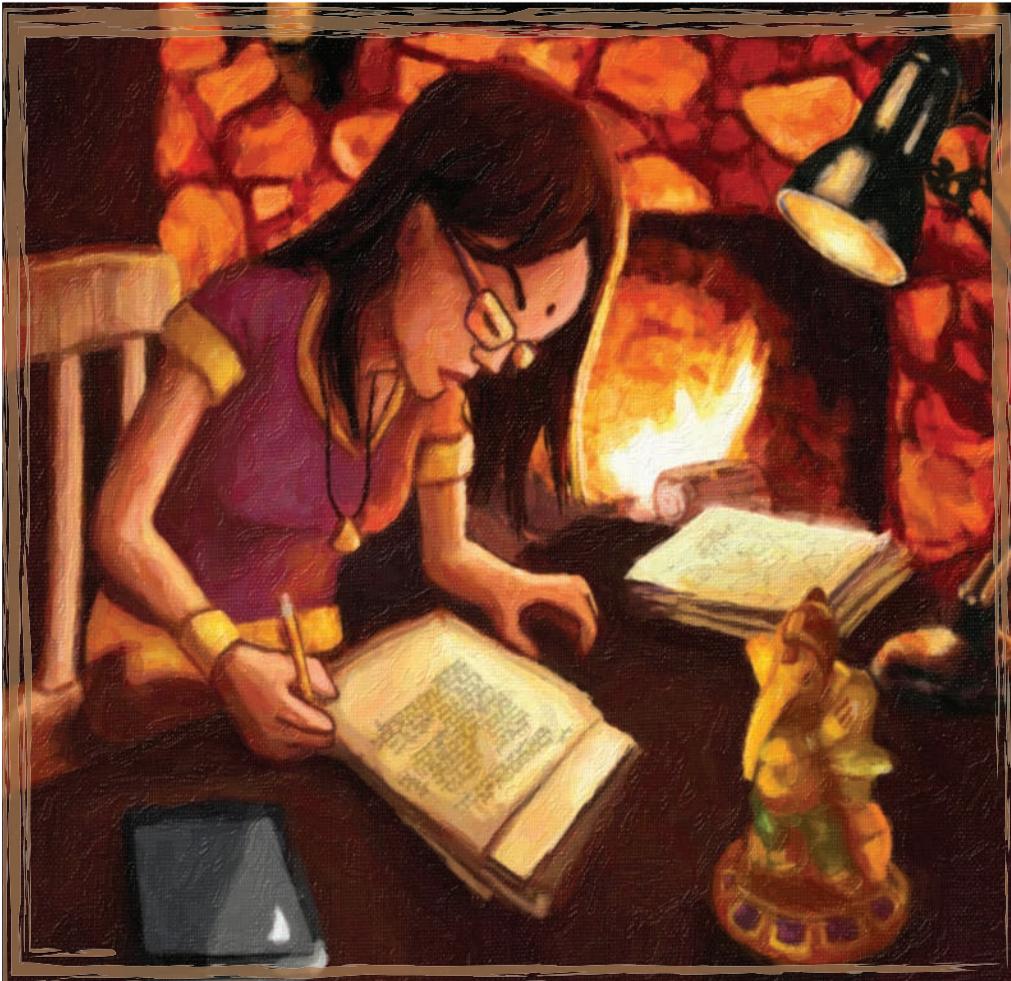
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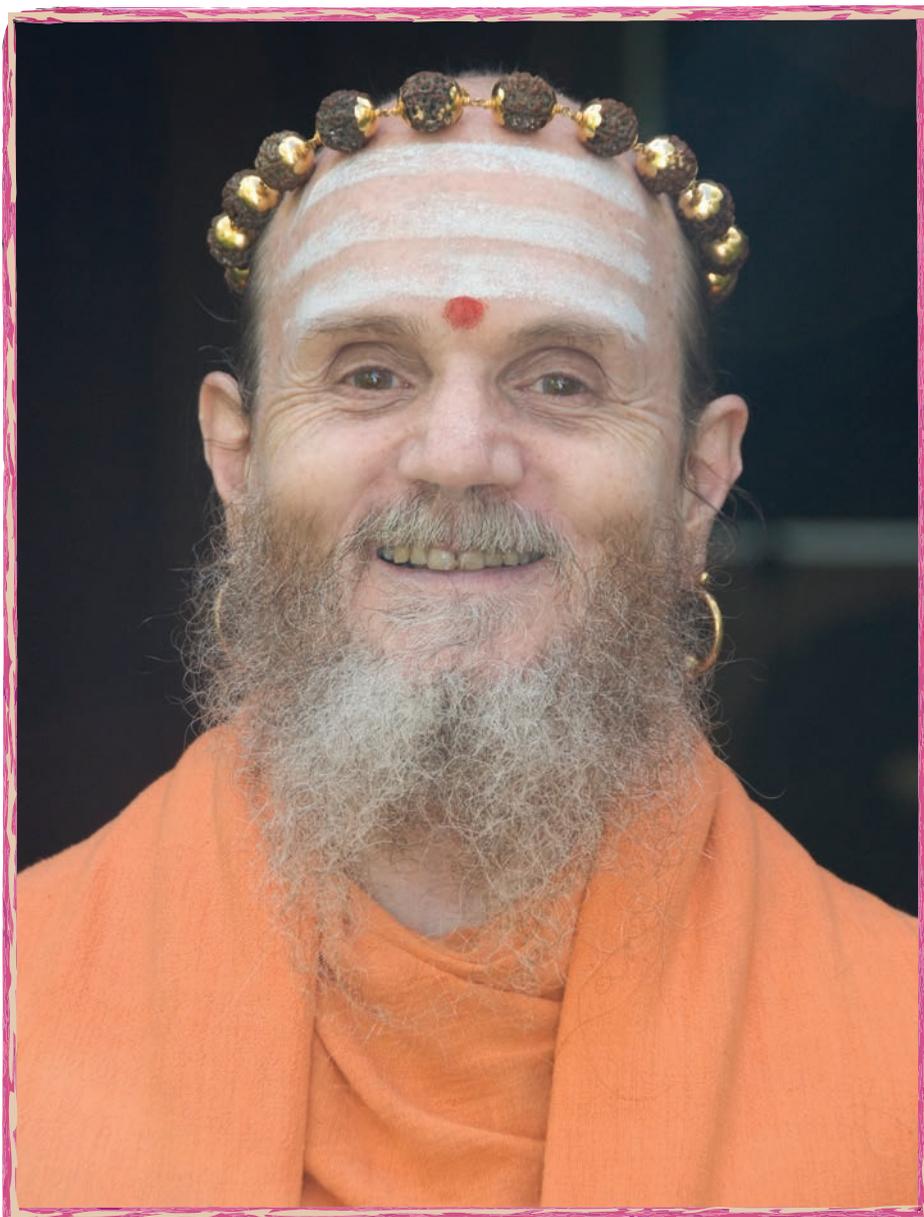
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## **Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami**

Spiritual Head of Kauai's Hindu Monastery  
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# Introduction

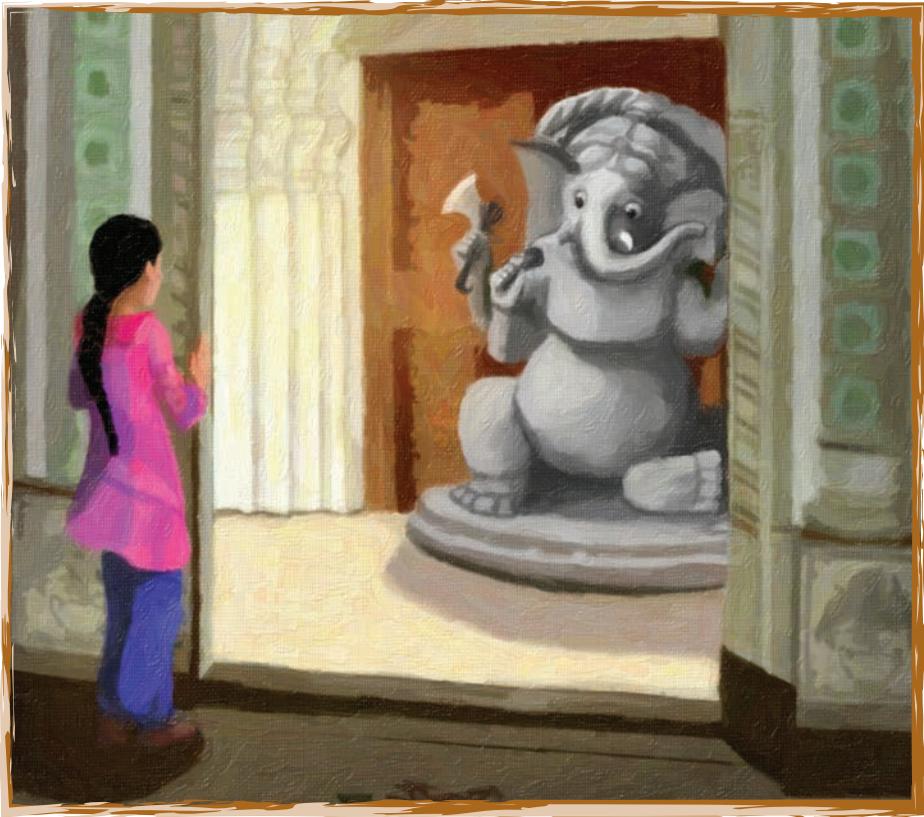
It's tough being a Hindu teen in the 21st century, whether you live in India or in the West. There are too many examples of what you should not do and too few examples of what you should do. Even your own relatives may barely live according to dharma. My Gurudeva, Sivaya Subramuniaswami, believed in providing the tools people of all ages need to face life's problems. "Give a man rice," he would say, "and you feed him for a day. Teach him how to grow rice and you feed him for a lifetime." For this second book of the Hindu Youth Series, I requested our team of editors, writers, artists and reviewers to create ten stories illustrating ten methods from Hindu tradition to control your mind and handle your emotions, to face difficult situations with wisdom and determination, and to tap into the depths of your innate spiritual qualities and powers. Set in modern-day US, India and Canada, the tales are intended for youths of age 14 and up—a period when more grown-up challenges come to us, sometimes so large we wonder if we can handle them.

Each story illustrates one life-management method. For example, in Chapter One, Ramya learns how to handle the emotions of being rejected when she is pushed out of a school clique. The method she learns involves writing down disturbing, hurtful, angry thoughts and then burning the paper in a fire—which is a way to drain the emotions from an experience.

The story in Chapter Four involves a boy named Ranjit whose anger results not only in miserable relations with family and friends, but also injury to himself. He learns to apply several methods Gurudeva advised for anger management.

A word of caution: some of these stories explore tough subjects and harsh situations—the aforementioned violent anger, the suicide of a friend, the divorce of parents. Yes, we could have developed every story with a light-hearted theme, but that would not reflect the world our children live in today. They need to learn Hindu ways of keeping on track, or getting their lives back in accord with dharma, or at least making the best of bad situations.

Parents who wish to teach these life skills should study and understand the principles; then, as opportunities present themselves, help their young teenagers discover how to implement each skill. To facilitate this process, a set of discussion questions is included at the end of each story. A lively discussion of each story should lead to a clear understanding. Hinduism is, after all, an experiential religion, one whose tools for right living can benefit your life, but only if you first understand them, then adopt them and put them to good use.



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## Coming to Terms with The End of a Friendship

“Hey there. I’m Nate,” declared the young man as he confidently pulled up a chair beside Diane, Ramya’s best friend since first grade. Diane threw Nate a coy smile. “Hi, Nate. I’m Diane, and this is my friend Ramya.”

Nate glanced in Ramya’s general direction with a cursory “Hi.” Then he turned back to Diane, who obviously enjoyed his attention. Ramya, uncomfortable with their flirting, looked down at her lunch, trying not to listen. She didn’t know it then, but this was the beginning of the end. For Ramya and her closest friends, high school was a strange new world.

Back in middle school, they called themselves the BIRDS, an acronym from their names, Beth, Irene, Ramya, Diane and Shiran. It seemed then they would stick together for life. Even some of their teachers called them the BIRDS. They would giggle when Mr. Donaldson came over as they were talking during class and ordered them to “Stop chirping!” They did everything together—Drama Club, weekend shopping, the school band, jewelry making and more. But soccer was the big one. For three years they played together on the community team.

Queens, New York, is America’s most diverse place, and the BIRDS were a reflection of that: Ramya the Hindu, Irene the Catholic, Diane the non-practicing Episcopalian/agnostic, Shiran the Jew and Beth the Unitarian. They didn’t give much thought to their religious differences until Irene’s last birthday party. When she shared how much she missed her grandpa, Ramya innocently remarked, “Don’t worry, he will probably be reborn in your family one day.”

Irene snapped back, "Catholics don't believe in reincarnation. It's heaven or hell for us, Grandpa included."

Beth jumped in, "Some Unitarians believe in reincarnation. It's not that crazy an idea."

"Who can prove that heaven and hell exist at all?" Diane challenged. "People just made up those ideas to scare their kids into behaving."

"Most people don't know it, but even many Jews accept the idea of reincarnation," Shiran interrupted, offering an olive leaf. "But I don't think we should keep talking about this. People get into screaming arguments over religion, and I don't think we want to go there."

"Agreed," Irene said. "Sorry, Ramya. Let's not let religious differences tear us apart."

From that moment, they agreed to disagree and focus on similarities. The next year, when a Pentecostal girl on their soccer team tried to get a Christian prayer going before the game, the BIRDS successfully stood together against it, even though three of them were Christians. The incident strengthened their exclusive group even more.

By anyone's standards, Ramya was a strong Hindu. Her life revolved around the family's daily morning puja, which she tried never to miss. She kept a picture of Ganesha on the wall in front of her desk and almost every day sought His guidance. The high point of her week was attending the temple on Bowne Street with her family every Sunday. Hundreds of Hindus would crowd the temple for the grand Ganesha puja, and over the years she had made many friends there. They would gather afterwards in the downstairs dining hall for a savory South Indian lunch, treating each other as brothers and sisters. In that culture, flirting, like Diane and Nate were doing now, just wasn't cool.

A hint that Ramya's life was about to change came even earlier, when Shiran opted for a Jewish high school where she could study Hebrew. She confided to Ramya that she might even

become a rabbi. Ramya and the three other BIRDS chose the public high school. It was massive, with five feeder schools, so there were many new faces. Ramya recognized a few kids from the temple, but no one close.

The first few weeks went well. The girls signed up for most of the same classes so they could stick together, though Beth took more art classes. The comfort of friends helped offset the unfamiliar surroundings and people, but of course nobody referred to them as the BIRDS anymore. Even among themselves, the old acronym fell out of use. Shiran was gone, without whom they would be “the BIRD,” and that didn’t work.

Things might have gone better if the girls hadn’t been in so many classes together. Ramya got off to a good start, scoring high on the first tests, especially in math. Diane practically flunked those tests but didn’t seem to mind—much to Ramya’s puzzlement. In middle school, Diane had always done well. Clearly something was different.

Even their beloved soccer started to drive a wedge between the girls. They all joined the freshmen girls’ team, but only Ramya qualified for the first string. Years of Bharatanatyam dance training had made her fit and agile. Diane was the better player in middle school, but she had spent the last summer hanging out instead of practicing.

The big change started with a “b”—as in boys, not BIRDS. Diane was cute, and right away the junior boys, like Nate, started chatting her up and asking her out. Ramya didn’t attract the same interest. She was pretty, but studious and reserved. Ramya thought the boys Diane attracted were pretty boring, and a few were downright stupid and irritating. She felt more comfortable with the boys she knew from the temple. Like her, they were concentrating on their studies rather than dating. She and her mother had discussed the hazards of getting involved at this age; plus the boys-and-girls issue had come up during youth classes at the temple. Ramya understood the wisdom of placing her time and

energy now into education and learning new skills.

Just two days after Nate boldly introduced himself, Ramya arrived in the cafeteria to find Diane, Beth and Irene all crowded together at a table with him and several other junior boys—not at the girls’ usual table. Not wanting to join them, Ramya ate lunch by herself. Later she confronted Diane in the hallway: “What was up with lunch today? Aren’t we sitting together anymore?”

“You can join us if you want. Nobody’s stopping you.”

“But I don’t like those boys.”

“Fine. Suit yourself,” snapped Diane. “But I’m telling you. Boys can be a lot more fun than girls. It’s part of growing up. Take a look around, Ramya. You see couples everywhere.”

Then she walked off.

“Wow, that was cold,” thought Ramya.

Over the next few weeks Beth and Irene gradually cut Ramya out altogether, too. As things evolved, the two former friends would brazenly turn and walk away when they saw Ramya coming down a hallway.

The final blow came when they all unfriended her on Facebook on the same day. Devastated, Ramya ran to her mother. “Mom, they all hate me! What happened?”

“I don’t know,” Ramya’s mom replied gently. “Kids change when they get into high school. It happens.”

“But I didn’t do anything!”

“Sometimes you don’t have to. From what you’ve said, they’re taking up different interests.”

Talking with mom helped a bit, but Ramya was quiet and withdrawn for the rest of the evening. She was still miserable the next morning.

“Are they bullying you at school, those girls?” Mother asked over breakfast.

“No, Mom, nothing like that, they just shut me out. Won’t talk to me, won’t even look at me. It hurts so much. We were so close. Mostly they want to hang out with boys, and I don’t. At least I

don't think I do."

The school had a strict policy against bullying. At the first school assembly the principal explained it clearly and firmly: "We do not tolerate bullying here. The first time it happens, you talk to me. The second, I talk to your parents. The third, you're suspended, and the fourth, I permanently expel you from this school!" The kids knew he was serious. The policy had been instituted two years earlier when a boy killed himself after being constantly bullied. The principal expelled the next three students—two girls and a boy—who repeatedly bullied others. When the kids finally realized he meant business, the bullying mostly stopped. Some thought it was a badge of honor to get hauled to the principal's office for a "talk," but no one wanted to risk getting expelled.

It would have been easier for Ramya's parents if it was bullying, because then they could involve the school. But this wasn't bullying in the traditional sense. It was shunning, which was equally hurtful, but the school couldn't do anything about that. They couldn't tell the students who their friends should be. Ramya's parents felt helpless. They knew such things also happened in India, but neither parents nor schools had effective solutions there either.

As weeks turned into months, Ramya's depression deepened. "Why did they do this to me?" she must have asked her mother a hundred times. "Why me? I wish things could go back to the way they were."

Not surprisingly, her school work was suffering; and she was cut from the soccer team for missing practice. No one wanted to be around her, she was so miserable. Many nights she cried herself to sleep.

One night at dinner, Mom announced, "Guruji is coming to town, and I've invited him over for dinner on Tuesday. Ramya, I want you to talk to him about what's happening in school."

Ramya wasn't enthusiastic. "Do I have to? Now? How's that going to help?"

“We’ll find out, but that’s what I do when I have a problem I can’t solve. I ask our Guruji.”

Tuesday evening Guruji arrived, accompanied by one of his young swamis. He sat on the living room couch, while Mom, Dad, Ramya and the swami sat on the floor.

Mom spoke first, “Guruji, Ramya has encountered some problems at school.”

He turned to Ramya kindly, “I noticed something was amiss, Ramya—you look upset inside.”

“It’s nothing; just problems with friends.”

“Hmmm, looks like more than that. Something is really wrong. Down there, by your solar plexus, there are dark colors in your aura.” Guruji pointed at her stomach, and Ramya felt her solar plexus churn. It was an odd feeling, like Guruji had physically touched her hurt feelings, just as one might touch a sore finger, causing one to jump.

“I... I don’t understand,” stammered Ramya.

“What happened? Something has really changed,” Guruji said in a loving voice.

Suddenly Ramya found herself pouring out the whole story, crying most of the time, while her mother held her hand. At the end she looked at Guruji pleadingly. “What did I do wrong?”

Guruji reflected for a few moments on what Ramya had told him. “You didn’t do anything except be you. Your friends betrayed you. They hurt you, and that was wrong. Small wonder you’re as upset as you are. You know how if you eat something that doesn’t agree with you, sometimes you throw it back up?”

“Yes, ugh!” Ramya had to smile at the question, and her mood improved just a bit.

“Getting hurt by others is like that. You’ve taken something into your subconscious mind that you can’t digest, something that actually harms you. You could even call it mental poison. That’s what I see in your aura. When I see someone’s aura, it is like looking at a hologram; I can see inside their body. Your emotions have

color—even sounds. Those hurtful emotions just sit there in your subconscious mind, clouding your thinking and causing constant emotional pain. Some people get physically sick from negative emotions like that.”

“So, I need to mentally vomit?” Ramya laughed.

“Something like that!” Guruji smiled, pleased that Ramya was taking his insights so well.

“Perceptive girl,” he thought to himself, and then said aloud, “I’m going to give you an assignment called Vasana Daha Tantra. Your parents have done it, and your mom can help you with it. I want you to write down two pages every day for the next month, telling everything that happened between you and your friends, good and bad, and burn those pages in the fire.”

“What good will that do?”

“It causes all those emotions in your subconscious to come back to the surface. At first, they will upset you again, but that’s OK. Before long you will stop feeling upset and start gaining insight into why things happened the way they did. That insight, which comes from your soul, will help resolve your hurt memories and ease your pain. I call it do-it-yourself Hindu magic—better than any psychiatrist, and it’s free, except for paper!”

The next evening Mom joined Ramya at the fireplace. She brought a stack of paper. They labeled two sheets for each day of the month, sixty sheets in all.

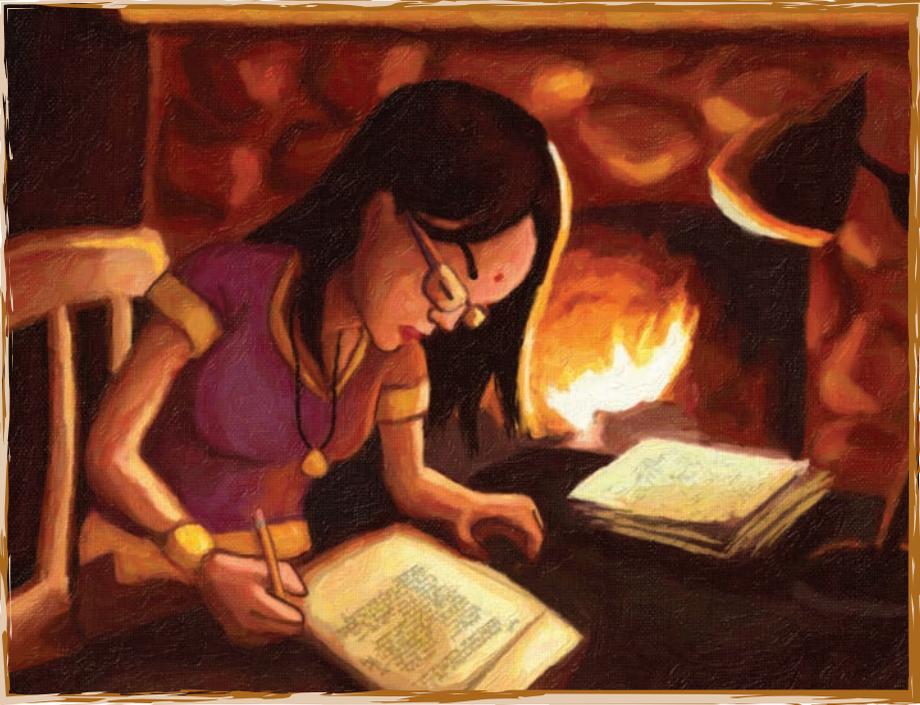
“That’s a lot of writing,” sighed Ramya, as she stared at the pile.

“That’s not so much. Your dad and I had to do over 500 pages each! It’s easy if you approach it one day at a time.”

“What should I write?”

“Whatever you want. But once you’re done, burn the papers right away in the fire. You can even write the same thing over and over again.”

And that’s just what Ramya did, one full page filled mostly with:



*"I hate Diane. I wish she wasn't so mean to me."*

and a few lines of

*"I hate you, too, Irene and Beth!"*

Then she took the lighter, lit the corner of the papers, and watched them burn in the fireplace.

"One page to go," she thought. "I don't know what good this is doing."

Mom smelled the smoke from the kitchen. "How's it going?" she asked, offering Ramya a plate of cookies. Knowing how upsetting the process could be, she kept a close eye on her progress. She never read anything Ramya wrote—that was her daughter's private business—but she was never far away. Vasana Daha Tantra was not something to be done in a casual manner.

"I told Diane I hate her a hundred times!"

"That's a start. Now write her a letter."

"And give it to her?"

"No, no. Say everything you want to say, and then burn it."

"OK."

*Dear Diane,*

*I remember the first time I met you. It was in Grade One, and you sat behind me. Right away I liked you. You were so funny, and so much fun to be around. I remember the day Miss Johnson scolded us for talking too much in class. I felt bad about that because I felt it was my fault. I remember the day you invited me to your house after school, and I just went, not really realizing my parents would be all worried. Then when they called the school, the secretary said I had gone home with you, so they called your home. Back then we were just two little kids having fun.*

*Later that year we asked Shiran and Irene and Beth to join us. We formed our own little club and played together all the time at recess. I had Mom invite all of you for my birthday party. She baked a cake and served some Indian snacks. I remember how much we laughed when Irene found the spices too hot and went running for a glass of water, but then spilled it all over on the way back to the table. We had fun then, didn't we?*

*Love, Ramya*

"That was strange to write," thought Ramya. "We liked each other so much, and now I hate her?"

Ramya burned that one, but kept writing.

*Dear Diane,*

*In Grade Four we all joined soccer. You were our team's best scorer for all those years. I liked being a defender because I could watch you score. I remember the time I decided to run forward after the ball when nobody was there. Then I passed it way over to you, but kept going. You could have taken a great shot, but instead you passed it back. That was the first goal I ever scored in soccer. It was all because of your unselfishness.*

*I also remember the time you lied about drawing on the bathroom wall at school. I knew you did it but I didn't tell anyone, because you were my friend. Friends don't tattle on each other. Later we snuck back in there and tried to wash it off, but it was ink, and we couldn't do it. The janitor lady came in and you told her how sorry you were. She didn't tell on us either because she realized we already felt bad about it.*

*Ramya*

Ramya started to sob. The nostalgia of all those great times growing up was too much. It was a weird feeling, like being at a funeral, saying goodbye to something you'll never see again. As the tears flowed freely, she felt her mom's hand on her shoulder. "You know, Dear, you can take a break when it gets really rough. I remember when I did it there were times I just couldn't write anymore. I felt like all the tears going on the paper were going to prevent it from burning. That was my signal to take a break."

Ramya stood up and hugged her mother. Together they made it to the kitchen table, tears flowing freely from both of them. Finally, Ramya got it together enough to say, "I think I could just lean over the fire and put it out with the tears." Together they laughed and talked about the next time they planned to go visit friends in India. Eventually Ramya said, "Thanks, Mom, for just being you. I think I'm ready to give it another go." When she got back she re-read what she had written. Suddenly she thought, "Diane was a bit of a sneak, wasn't she? And a liar, too. I would never have written my name on that wall." She had never stepped back before to really think about her friend's behavior.

The next day at school Ramya was in a better mood. As Guruji had predicted, she had gained insight into her own feelings and reactions, as well as those of others. Observing from a distance, she suddenly realized how insecure Diane really was. "That's why she wants those boys around," Ramya thought. "They make her feel wanted. Her parents are divorced, and I know her home life isn't as positive as mine is."

The next evening she began again:

*Dear Diane,*

*Then in September it changed. I really don't know why, but you started ignoring me. I know you found new friends a lot quicker than I did. You always did have more of an outgoing personality than me. Maybe I was a bit jealous of your new friends. You and Irene and Beth seemed to want to hang out more with other kids. I felt hurt by all that. I really was surprised. I guess I had this fairy tale dream in which the five of us would be friends forever. But that didn't happen.*

*The first time I noticed something had changed was at lunch when you*

*were sitting with the junior boys and didn't want me there. That really hurt! You could have been kind about it, but that isn't like you, is it? 'Cause you're just a mean, nasty person—you don't really care about anyone except yourself!*

*And about those boys, you were so flattered they were paying attention to you, a lowly ninth grader. If they were anything special, don't you think they would be talking to some of the junior girls instead of you? You were the best they could do, that's what was really happening. You're so stupid!*

*Your former friend, Ramya*

“Sure glad Diane isn’t going to read that letter,” Ramya thought as she burned it up. “But look at me—talking like that. I can be just as mean as Diane. I should think about that.”

A few days later at school, Ramya watched as Diane and Irene nearly got into a fight with some of the junior girls, apparently over Nate and his friends. “Wow,” she thought to herself, “it might have been a blessing in disguise to get kicked out of their group.”

And so it went. Ramya wrote about good times and bad times, anger and forgiveness, sometimes the same thing over and over, two pages a night, up in flames and gone forever. And she continued gaining insight—seeing into people and their motivations more clearly each day.

After a couple of weeks the writing started to change. Ramya became more perceptive about her friends, her life so far and herself. She wrote to Diane, to Irene, to Beth (who hadn’t really been so mean) and even to her teachers, as she realized how kind most of her teachers were. For some reason her visits to the temple seemed more meaningful as she went through a kind of cleansing process inside.

Dear Diane,

We had a tight little clique, didn't we? I like to think we weren't like those other groups of kids in school, with their tight, close friendships and their wall of meanness toward other kids. True, we weren't mean much—but sometimes we were, like when Katlin wanted to hang out with us. She was so totally out of place with our group! But then what's the difference between us not letting her in and you pushing me out? We weren't nice to her.

And what's with me letting the group treat Katlin like that? Here I think I'm somebody special, someone who wouldn't be so mean and cold to a person who wanted to be my friend. But I did just that, didn't I? And why do I need to be in a clique anyway? To make me feel special? We five girls got together, declared ourselves the best and then kept everyone else out. How silly is that?

Ramya

"Mom," began Ramya the next morning at breakfast, "I realized something last night while I was writing."

"What was that?" Mom asked as she poured Ramya some orange juice.

"Here I'm all upset because the girls kicked me out of our special little clique, but I created that clique just as much as the rest of them did. And we did it by not letting anyone else join. In fact, we even pushed other girls away, and not always so kindly. So why should I complain when I get pushed out? It's a karma I created myself."

Mom smiled. "That's insightful, Ramya. That's the wonderful

thing about Vasana Daha Tantra—how it brings that kind of insight into our personalities. Well done.”

Finally, on the thirtieth day, Ramya wrote:

*Dear World,*

*People grow up, people change. I changed. I had friends who were not as much like me as I thought, and I got hurt. I can't change them, but I can change me, and I'm doing it. I helped create that exclusive little clique, and then I got tossed out of it—my bad!*

*I'm smart, I'm hard working, religious and a good dancer and soccer player to boot. Maybe I'm even pretty. Whatever. It's my life, my friends, my school career, and I'll make it work for me. No more being at the mercy of others!*

*Ramya*

The next day in the cafeteria she noticed a new but vaguely familiar face by the lunch counter. She had to think for a moment but then realized where she had seen her. Yes, it was Shanti, the girl she saw recently at the temple. Just then Beth came up behind Ramya and asked if she could join her for lunch.

They sat down together, and Beth explained that now she, too, had been pushed out by Irene and Diane. They talked for some time, reconnecting after many months. “You look happy,” said Beth. “I was worried about you. What changed?”

“I got depressed after the three of you dropped me. It really got to me, more than it should have. But our family guru gave me a remedy. He had me write down everything that was bothering me and burn it in a fire. Sounds strange, but it worked. I did it for thirty days, and by the end I was no longer upset and depressed,

plus I had gained some real insight into my life.”

Beth looked at her with amazement. “Wow! That sounds just like what we do at my church, only we call it the Burning Bowl Ceremony. Once or twice a year everyone writes down a problem, and we all go up one by one and burn the papers.”

“That’s interesting,” Ramya responded. “So we do have some similarities.”

Beth’s expression turned serious. “That’s not the only similarity. You remember, back in September, when Diane and Irene and I cut you out?”

“How could I forget?”

Beth’s eyes were unwavering. “Well, I just have to get it off my chest. I am really, really sorry about that. I should have gone with you instead of them. I had to have a couple hard lessons, but you saw it right away. Bottom line is, I’m way too young to get involved with boys. I mean, I like boys and all that, but I’m only fourteen! And those older boys were just trying to take advantage of us. I really do want to study hard and get into a good college. My mom has convinced me to not waste my time on boys right now.”

Ramya smiled. “It’s okay, Beth. Don’t worry. We all have our lessons growing up. And I forgive you. Come on, I’m hungry. Let’s eat.”

Just then, Ramya looked over and noticed Shanti standing by herself, looking around for a place to sit. “Is it okay if I ask someone to eat with us?” Ramya asked.

Beth gave her an odd look, “Why not? It’s not like it’s us BIRDS against the world anymore, you know.”

“That’s right, and no more cliques for either of us. We’ll make our circle of friends just as wide as possible!”

Ramya got up and walked over to where Shanti stood looking lonely and uncomfortable. “Hi. I’m Ramya. I saw you the other day at the Ganesha temple. I should have said hello then, but so many people were there on pilgrimage during the holidays.”

“Yes, I remember you,” replied Shanti. “We just moved here from Cincinnati—my parents wanted to live close to a temple. I don’t know anyone at this school.”

“Come join us at our table,” said Ramya.

# Discussion Questions

*The example in this story explores how one's relationships develop and change throughout life. Following dharma may mean dropping some friends and adding new ones, as Ramya discovers. The practice of Vasana Daha Tantra is used to resolve and release the emotional attachment and gain new insight and understanding. Emotional attachments may include people, places, personal habits and more. The story demonstrates the effectiveness of Vasana Daha Tantra through this one specific example, but it can be employed for all of life's difficulties, hurts and confusions.*

1. How aware are you of cliques? Have you ever been a member of one, or felt excluded from one?
2. What might have happened if Ramya had sent the 'hate' letter to Diane?
3. Why did Ramya sob some days as she wrote?
4. For Ramya, changing schools was a dramatic change in life. Have you experienced such dramatic changes? Why can these times be so trying emotionally?
5. Ramya was advised to take plenty of time and not be in a hurry with this technique of releasing emotional attachment. Why is this important?
6. How effective was the advice Ramya got on Vasana Daha Tantra from Mom and Guruji? Who do you turn to for advice on problems and spiritual techniques?
7. Explain how this story increased your understanding of Vasana Daha Tantra. Did reading it encourage you to use it?
8. What are some advantages of Vasana Daha Tantra being a completely private affair?
9. Do you think Vasana Daha Tantra works better for certain personality types? If so, which ones?
10. What other life situations can you think of where Vasana Daha Tantra might be effective?
11. Did you find this story believable? If you were to rewrite it, what would you change and why?



New Jersey  
Department  
of Motor Vehicles

## Manu Learns Confidence

**A**rpana burst into Manu's room and shook his bed. "This is it! We're 16!"

"Don't you ever knock?" a drowsy Manu asked his twin sister. "So what about being 16? Birthday parties are for children. We're not little kids anymore."

"Wow, you're still asleep! We get our driving permits today!"

He sat up. "Oh, right! I can't believe I forgot. What time is it?"

"Already 7:30. They open at 8:00."

The twins rushed downstairs to find Mom and Dad having breakfast. Neither parent had forgotten what today meant. A "Happy Birthday to you both" from Dad was followed by a whispered aside to Mom, "Here we go..."

"If we leave right now, we can be first in line," Arpana said excitedly.

"I think we'll leave after we all finish breakfast and have a birthday blessing in the shrine room, if you don't mind," said Dad with an affectionate smile.

He had bravely agreed to teach the twins to drive, a task sufficient to make a nervous wreck of any father—even with just one teen, let alone two. But he had faced everything else about their growing up as a pair, so why not this? The twins were enrolled in driver's education at school, as well as a driver training course—state law required both—so the task did not fall solely on him. He knew there would be difficult moments in the months ahead. But at least this wasn't India, with its unique driving customs! Even he didn't drive back home.

The first step was simple. They were in and out of the New Jersey Motor Vehicle Commission office in Edison in less than an hour, both acing the written test. They walked out with huge

smiles, permits in hand; a passerby might think they just graduated from Harvard.

“Did you pass?” Mom called out when the trio arrived home.

“Of course!” announced Manu with a triumphant air.

“So, when did Dad say you could start driving?” Mom queried.

“Tomorrow. And he wants us to practice in an empty parking lot first. I don’t know why we can’t just go now; I’m ready,” Manu complained. He was restless all day. The next morning it was he who woke his sister.

Dad watched them gobble up breakfast. He was nearly as anxious as they were. Sure, this would be their first time driving, but it was also his first time teaching it. He wasn’t sure how that would go. When they arrived in the mall’s vast empty lot, Dad challenged, “Who’s first?”

“After you, Little Sister,” Manu replied coyly. All of four minutes older, he enjoyed referring to his “seniority,” although neither really cared. Besides, he was confident she would be nervous and want to stop right away. He was pretty sure she would have trouble with the stick shift, since she wasn’t the most coordinated person with machines. In their driver training class they would be using an automatic, but last year Dad had gotten a good deal on their 2005 Audi A3 Sportback with a six-speed manual gearbox—a nice car with decent fuel economy.

Manu’s low expectations of Arpana’s driving skills proved to be unfounded. He was astonished when she got through the first task like it was nothing. It sounded simple: engage the clutch, put the car in first gear, disengage the clutch, drive a few feet, engage the clutch and shift to second, disengage the clutch, drive a few more feet, engage the clutch and use the brake to stop. She did it three times in a row without stalling, and there were only a couple tiny jerks from over-revving the engine.

Manu’s turn didn’t go as he had imagined. He put the car in gear, popped the clutch and promptly killed the engine. “Umm, don’t do that,” cautioned Dad, trying to hide a grimace. No doubt

the Audi was a sturdy car, but he couldn't bear it taking such rough treatment.

"Let the clutch out slowly. There is a point where you will feel it start to grab. Press the gas a bit and go."

Same result.

At least on the third attempt he didn't stall it. Instead the Audi leapt ahead like a rabbit. Too much gas! Manu panicked and slammed on the brake. The car stopped abruptly with a short but emphatic screech of rubber on pavement, again killing the engine.

Arpana giggled from the back seat. Dad shot her a stern look and she quieted down—until a few minutes later when Manu still couldn't get the timing right. It was either jerk ahead, or stall, or some combination of both.

Eventually Manu improved and it was Arpana's turn again. This time Dad introduced some steering, a full circle in the empty lot, again first to second gear.

"I want you to look at the yellow lines that define the parking spaces. We will pretend they are streets. You can drive down them, staying between the lines. Then we'll circle around."

Arpana was a natural, driving around several times with ease.

Between turns, Dad had them shut the engine off and apply the parking brake. He wanted to simulate real conditions as much as possible. When it was Manu's turn, he was so nervous he stalled the car again, this time because he didn't release the parking brake. After one try, Dad gently touched his shoulder and pointed to the brake handle.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Manu mumbled.

"Because you have to remember. Don't worry, I have made that mistake, too," Dad consoled. "I want you to experience it and figure it out for yourself."

Arpana kept silent this time.

The rest of the lesson did not go well for Manu, especially the unavoidable comparison with his sister. He was sullen when they arrived home.

“How did it go?” Mom inquired cheerfully.

“Terrible!” snapped Manu as he slunk off to his room in defeat. “I’ll never get it!”

Mom turned to Dad. “That bad?”

“He’s having trouble with the stick shift. We’ll see how the next lesson goes.”

But the next week was not much better. Manu was embarrassed by his inability to get the hang of the stick shift, compared with his sister’s obvious knack for driving. Even worse was her sympathetic attitude, which only annoyed him.

After another unproductive driving lesson, Arpana tried to comfort him. “I remember when Mom was trying to teach us to tie our shoes. You figured it out way before I did. Then you helped me, and I learned it quickly. You were a better teacher than Mom.”

He snapped, “So now you’re saying you should be teaching me? Thanks, but no thanks! I’ll stick with Dad!”

“No, that’s not what I meant at all, Manu. I’m just saying we’re different.” But her well-meaning tries to explain were in vain.

Manu appreciated her effort, even though he couldn’t bring himself to say so. Normally he and Arpana had fewer disagreements and confrontations than other siblings. That was part of their twin bond. (They had even shared a secret language when they were little.) Also, their parents had raised them to not compete with each other, but to be proud of their individual strengths. “Cooperation over competition” was the family creed. Manu was having trouble upholding that ideal.

If Arpana was being mean to him, he could always subtly retaliate—stopping just short of causing Mom or Dad to step in. But for this outpouring of sisterly sympathy, there was nothing he could do. It wasn’t like he should expect her to do poorly on purpose, just so he could feel better about himself.

By the third lesson, it was obvious Manu was experiencing a serious mental block, a combination of embarrassment at his lack of innate driving skill and the painful comparison with his sister.

Dad even wondered at times whether Manu would ever learn to drive.

Dad was frustrated, but he wasn't ready to stop trying. He had other methods to use. One evening he sat Manu down in the den. "Tonight we're going to have a driving lesson here at home."

"How's that supposed to work? Some kind of video game? We're going to play Mario Kart together?" Manu's sarcasm came through loud and clear.

"No, no. Remember Gurudeva's book, *The Power of Affirmation*?"

"Yes ... vaguely. We talked about it when you were teaching me to keep my room clean.

"And it worked, right?"

"It sure did."

"I think we can apply the same principles to your driving. The central idea is to repeat a statement, such as 'I can, I will, I am able to learn to drive a car,' over and over again while clearly visualizing yourself driving the car well and feeling just how that would feel. Let's try it."

They sat side by side, just like they were in the car, and Dad said, "Now reach for the shift stick, push the clutch in and put the car in first gear."

"This is silly."

"Just try it. You have to believe you are in the car, even hear the engine running and feel it move. Remember, at first you didn't think affirmations would help you keep your room clean either."

"OK, I'll try it."

Manu went through the motions of putting the car in gear.

"Oops, I stalled it," he said, smiling.

Dad chuckled. "That's good actually, because you're visualizing strongly. Try again; see yourself doing it right, tell yourself in your mind, 'I can, I will, I am able' over and over."

Manu closed his eyes and tried again.

"I think I'm getting it!"

"OK, now practice this on your own, ten minutes every night



this week. You know, this method of affirmation and visualization has been tested on basketball players. It was shown to be effective in improving their aim with the ball even when it was done entirely in their mind. Most do it just before every free throw. Watch closely sometime, and you can observe them doing the visualization.”

“Really? I didn’t know that.”

“And remember, there’s a second, equally important part of affirmation. In addition to visualizing the exact motor skills you will use, you must experience being confident about driving. See yourself going down the highway at sixty miles an hour, smoothly changing lanes, merging easily into traffic, downshifting for the off ramp. You are an expert driver, the one who can, who will, who is able to master every aspect of driving. Watch me, if you like, when we’re going someplace—try to tune into my confidence while driving. Get that feeling and make it your own. Right now your subconscious mind is saying, ‘I can’t drive.’ We are going to reprogram it to say, ‘I’m a great driver.’ It’s just like rewriting a

computer program.”

“I still don’t understand how it works.”

“The subconscious mind—that’s the part that remembers everything that’s ever happened to us—is sometimes a bit uncooperative. If it thinks, ‘I can’t do this, because I tried and failed once already,’ then sure enough, you won’t be able to do it—in this case, learn to drive. But you can convince your subconscious that you can do it by telling it over and over, with conviction, ‘I can, I will, I am able.’ Eventually the mind is reprogrammed from ‘I can’t’ to ‘I can,’ and you’re off and running—or, in this case, driving.”

To reduce Manu’s stress level, Dad started giving the twins driving lessons separately and no longer talked about driving when they were all together. He took Manu out twice as often, but never mentioned that—not at the dinner table or anywhere else. Soon Manu started showing progress.

Around the sixth week of practice, though, he seemed to level off and seemed less confident as when he first started the affirmations.

“Are you still doing the affirmations?” Dad asked.

“Sort of, part of the time.”

“You have to do it every day for ten minutes, visualizing the next part of our lessons, telling yourself hundreds of times, ‘I can, I will, I am able,’ feeling yourself confident about driving. I’ve never told you this, but I used this same affirmation when I first got a job at the IBM factory. It was really complicated work, and I was afraid I would get fired. But I kept my confidence up with the affirmation and furiously studied the equipment manuals off hours. I just barely managed to keep up with the long-time employees, but I did it.”

Manu stared, as if he was seeing his dad through new eyes. “Wow, you never told me that. I always assumed things came easy for you.”

“That’s the way you’re supposed to think about your dad when you’re little. But now you’re sixteen, and you’re finding that not

everything in life comes easy. Not for you, not for me, not for anyone. And sometimes, yes, you'll encounter something you simply can't do, even with a lot of effort and determination. But you can drive. I'm sure of that."

One day after a lesson—a day when Manu didn't look frustrated—Mom decided to ask again. "So, how's it going, Son?"

"It's better now, Mom. Dad is so patient with me, like he'll spend whatever time is required until I get it. I appreciate that. Did he tell you how I'm using affirmations?"

"Yes, he did. I've used them, too. They really work well if you can visualize the outcome strongly enough, really feel it. It's kind of like the difference between casually saying, "Thanks," compared to looking in someone's eyes and saying, "Thank you so much," with real intent. There's about ten times as much emotional force in one way over the other. Then the message actually sinks in, that I really am thankful and not just saying thanks to be polite. With a statement like that, it's one person to another, but with an affirmation it's you relating to a different part of yourself."

"Thanks, Mom. That's cool. Hey, pretty soon I'll be able to drive when we go shopping."

By the time the twins turned seventeen and could take the road test for their probationary license, Manu had caught up with Arpana in basic driving skills. Dad let one or the other drive almost all the time now, being careful to have them take turns. Whenever they went anywhere, one would drive there and the other would drive home. The twins thought of it as a favor, but actually it was a continuation of driver training. Dad watched carefully how they dealt with each new traffic situation. They played a game of watching other drivers for errors, like not signaling—an important part of the safety strategy called "defensive driving." Dad's trust in them made them more confident. He knew a nervous driver is a dangerous one.

When they returned home from taking the road test at the DMV on their seventeenth birthday, Mom met them at the door.

She didn't need to ask how they had done—their grins gave it away.

"I think Dad should take us all out to dinner at that new vegetarian restaurant to celebrate," she announced, having caught a contagious smile.

"I'm driving!" Manu shouted.

"Can we take the car to school on Monday?" Arpana pleaded. Mom and Dad had seen this coming.

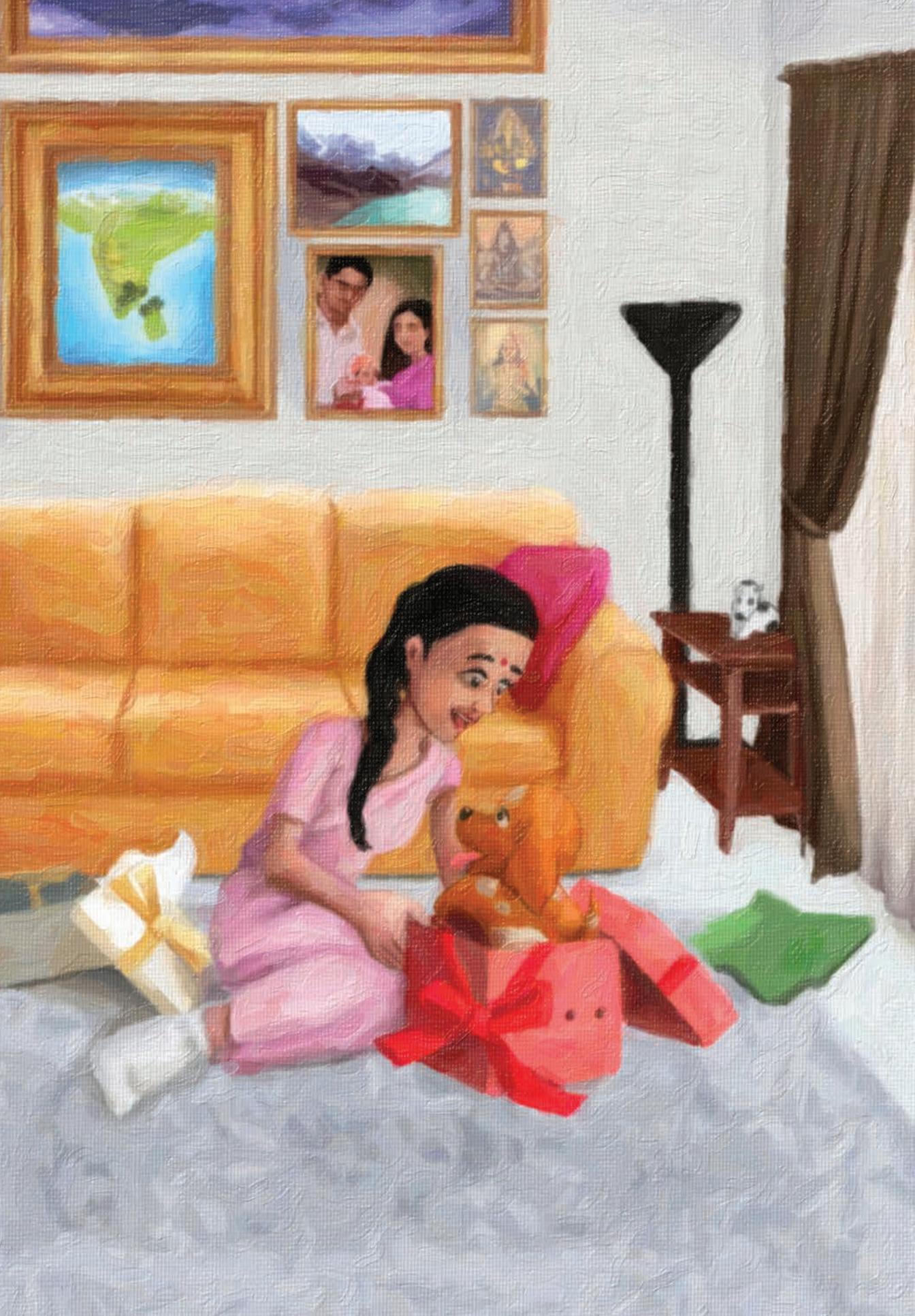
"No way!" they exclaimed in unison.

# Discussion Questions

*Manu loses confidence in himself when learning to drive turns out to be more difficult than he had expected. He loses belief in himself when his sister outperforms him as they learn together. His father teaches him the power of affirmation, by which he works with his mind to overcome his lack of confidence. Positive affirmations can be used to mold the subconscious in a wide variety of situations.*

1. Manu's problem is caused in part by a miscalculated overconfidence. Have you ever been totally wrong about how you would perform a certain task, either doing worse than you expected, or better?
2. What is the skill in your life so far that was the hardest to learn? What made it so hard?
3. Have you ever given up on something that you would like to try it again? If so, what is it?
4. What is the gender stereotype relating to skills in this story? Have you ever made a false assumption based on gender stereotype?
5. Manu was admirably persistent. What factors contributed to this? Why didn't he give up?
6. Manu's dad showed great patience. Might he have been using an affirmation at the same time? What would it be?
7. In your life, what do you think is the next tough skill you will learn? What positive affirmation would you use to achieve your goal?
8. Why is it important to put real concentration, visualization and emotion into an affirmation?
9. What is an example of a negative affirmation? Would negative affirmations be equally powerful, but in the opposite way? Can we make them without even realizing it?





## Amrita's Hard-Earned Lesson

**O**n the evening of Amrita's thirteenth birthday, Mom brought out one last present, a big basket with a ribbon on it. Amrita took it from her and was surprised when the weight shifted inside. "Careful," warned Mom, "This one is fragile. Open it slowly."

Amrita untied the huge bow and pulled back the wrappings to find the cutest puppy she had ever seen, a red and white spaniel with a white dot on her forehead. Her friends huddled around excitedly to have a closer look.

Reaching down and picking up the dog, she hugged it close and exclaimed, "Bindi! You have a little bindi on your forehead." The name stuck. Bindi was an instant hit with all of Amrita's friends, and they took turns cuddling and playing. An hour later, tucked out, the puppy fell asleep in Amrita's lap.

Dad showed Amrita the puppy bed and pen they had bought. "We'll set these up in the garage for her first few weeks until she's housebroken. After that, she can sleep in your room."

The next morning at breakfast Amrita beamed, "I didn't think you would ever buy me a puppy. I still can't believe it."

Mom smiled, "Oh, we thought about it a lot—it wasn't just a whim. But we figured you're old enough now to handle the responsibility that comes with a pet."

"Don't worry, Mom. I'm sure I can handle it."

School rushed by for Amrita. Each day she hurried home to be with Bindi. The spaniel was smart enough to know just when Amrita would return and be waiting at the gate. One night at dinner Mom said laughingly, "I don't even have to watch the clock to know when you're coming home!" They also noticed that Bindi was a sociable dog. She instantly made friends with the neighbor's

collie, despite the substantial size difference.

One night Dad elaborated, "Bindi's a 'Cavalier King Charles Spaniel' with Blenheim markings—you would think they could just say 'red and white.' It's a popular breed in the UK and now in the US. She's had her first and second puppy shots. Now that she's twelve weeks old, we'll take her for the third and last round."

"How long will she live?" asked Amrita, since her Dad had gotten technical.

"For this breed, the life expectancy is between nine and fourteen years."

"Wow, she could live till I'm twenty-seven. That's a long time—I could even be married by then!"

Amrita didn't like going to the doctor, but when she got to the veterinarian's office she saw that everyone who worked there loved animals. That's why they did what they did! She enjoyed seeing the many pets, though it was pretty obvious that the hissing cats didn't think dogs should share the same doctor. The shot was simple and Bindi hardly noticed. "It's called a 'seven way,'" explained Dr. Gupta. "It will protect her against distemper, rabies, kennel cough and several other contagious diseases."

Every day after school Amrita was met by a soft yelp and an eager wet tongue. It seemed Bindi was saying, "Where were you? Where did you go? It doesn't matter. I'm just so happy to see you!"

And Amrita would talk back, "Yes, Bindi, I'm happy to see you, too. Were you bored today? Did Mom remember to feed you?" Actually, when Amrita was away, Bindi followed Mom everywhere she went in the house.

Each day at school Amrita had a different story about Bindi's antics to share with her friends. Every morning after the family puja, she would take a pinch of sacred ash outside the shrine room for Bindi. She once let Bindi come in, but the puppy's curiosity about all the interesting items created quite a mess. Everyone agreed Bindi should not be allowed in there again!

If Amrita woke up during the night, Bindi would immediately

stand up in her basket near the bed, ready and on guard. But actually she was a terrible guard dog, because she was friendly with everyone—including complete strangers!

The two often went outside to play. The little pup had no problem romping with the bigger dogs in the neighborhood. To Amrita and Bindi, it was all just so much fun. Little did they realize the possible dangers of playing with other dogs.

Sometimes bad things happen quickly. For Amrita, there was no warning. Just two weeks after her most recent shots, Bindi suddenly didn't seem herself. She was listless and kept moving her jaw like she was chewing gum.

"I think we need to take her back to the vet," Mom announced.

Amrita doubted the need. "She had all her puppy shots. I'm sure she's fine."

But the next day Bindi was worse, and blood was coming from her nose. Dad said, "Amrita, we have to take her in."

At the vet hospital, Dr. Gupta gave the diagnosis, "Distemper, I'm afraid."

Amrita objected, "Wasn't that one of the diseases the puppy shots were for?"

The vet replied, "Yes, but the vaccine doesn't always work. In rare cases, the dog can even get the disease from the vaccine. Was she outside with other dogs before the third set of shots?"

Amrita stared at him, unable to speak. Her eyes welled up, and tears streamed down her face.

Dad said, "Yes, the puppy's been playing with the other neighborhood dogs. But they all seemed healthy."

Dr. Gupta went on, "We'll never know where it came from. But I have to tell you, Amrita, the chances of Bindi living through this are not good. We will give her some medicine to ease her suffering, but I'm afraid I don't have a cure."

Touching his sobbing daughter's shoulder, he picked up the small carrier kennel with Bindi whimpering inside and they walked out to the car.

Mom and Dad had already decided not to shield Amrita from Bindi's illness and likely death. This wasn't the kind of responsibility they had in mind when they gave her the puppy, but they knew life sometimes brings unintended and unexpected lessons.

From Bindi's deterioration over the first day and the words of Dr. Gupta, they knew it wouldn't be long. They allowed Amrita to remain home from school for a few days. She took care of Bindi, giving her the pain medicine and cleaning her after she could no longer walk. Just three days later, Bindi died quietly in her lap.

Dad looked on compassionately as his daughter buried Bindi in the backyard under the big orange tree. Returning to the house, she headed for her room and quietly shut the door. Then she saw a little ball lying pathetically near the basket with no one to play with it. All of Bindi's things jumped out at her in a kind of blurry vision, so real yet so incomplete without their owner. She almost thought Bindi would crawl out from under the bed any minute, jump around and lick her hand.

Confused thoughts whizzed through her brain. Bindi was dead, wasn't she? Hadn't she just buried her? Bindi would not be waking up to play. But maybe it was all a dream. Maybe tomorrow she would wake up from the nightmare.

Her stoicism broke, and tears flowed down her cheeks as she buried her face in a pillow. Racking sobs shook her body. The teenager cried like she had never cried before. Mom came in and held her until she fell asleep. There was an eerie sense of comfort in Mom's warmth, as only hours earlier she had lovingly held Bindi. Bindi's sleep was just more permanent.

"Why did we ever buy her that puppy?" Mom sadly asked Dad, back in the living room. "We've just made her miserable."

"Yes, Dear, it is painful to see her go through this. And I'm afraid she's having it a lot tougher than we are. But how could we know? Amrita was just two when your mother died and had little sense of what death meant. And death is supposed to happen to old people, not the young. I'll try to console her tomorrow. I'm

sure sleep will help a bit.”

The next morning, a Saturday, Dad went to sit with Amrita in the garden, not far from where Bindi was buried.

Watching his daughter staring at the spot, marked by a few flowers, he spoke softly, “You know, we Hindus believe the soul is separate from the body and goes on after death in the next world.”

“So does that mean Bindi is still there, somewhere?”

“Not exactly. Guruji once explained that dogs have a ‘group soul,’ sort of like one heavenly dog is the soul of every physical dog of a certain type. But he also said that sometimes when dogs and other animals associate with humans, they start to form individualized souls. I think Bindi made some progress in her short life, but it’s not like the same Bindi can be reborn.”

“So she’s never coming back!” Amrita ran off to her room sobbing, overwhelmed by her memories of the day before.

Dad returned to the kitchen to talk to Mom, not sure he was handling the situation well.

“Sometimes there are just no good answers,” said Mom. “It’s all Siva’s will. Amrita will come out of it sooner or later. I think everyone grieves on his or her own schedule. There are still days when I feel sad about my mom.”

But Amrita continued to be desolate, and her mother became increasingly concerned. Finally, three weeks after Bindi’s death, she took Amrita to the orange tree, and both of them gave the tree a big hug. Mom said softly, “You have to let go now, Amrita. The more you think about Bindi and cry for her, the more you remain attached to her. You have to let go, for your own good. It’s called being affectionately detached. Death is part of life; we can’t fool ourselves that it is not. When my mother died, I couldn’t let go for years, but finally I did.”

“I just want Bindi back!”

“Tomorrow, let’s go somewhere, just you and me. I think I know something that will help.”

She made idli sambar for breakfast, Amrita’s favorite.



After the meal, Mom announced, “Before we leave, we need to pick some flowers and leaves, half a basketful of each.” Amrita gathered them from the garden, including from the orange tree, and soon they were driving in the countryside. White fences, cobbled paths and beautiful vistas gave the drive a picture-book look, but Amrita just stared blankly out the window. Mom drove to a state park they often visited and parked near the river. It was early, and the area was deserted.

“Amrita, we’re going to do Ganga Sadhana. It’s a way to let go of something that hurts inside you. We can’t go all the way to India to sit by the real river Ganga, so this river will be our Ganga today.”

Mother and daughter carried the basket of flowers and leaves to the edge of the river, and Mom helped Amrita step out onto a big, flat rock that protruded into the flowing water.

“Here’s how this works. You take a leaf from your basket, hold it in your hands and think about Bindi for a minute or two. Then put those thoughts into the leaf and offer the leaf into the river, watching as the water takes it away. Then take a flower and offer

it into the river to thank Ganga for carrying your thoughts away.”

Amrita was puzzled. “How’s this supposed to work, Mom?”

“It is a way to calm a strong emotion that just won’t go away—in this case, your feelings about Bindi’s death. Each time you think of Bindi, you mentally take the emotion and put it in the river. Water purifies everything, and in a sense, it absorbs your emotion. Do it enough times, and finally the emotion will just be a normal memory, not something that upsets you every time you think of it. Try it, you will see.”

Mom took a seat on a rock nearby to do her own Ganga Sadhana, calling up the memories of her mom, who had died eleven years earlier. Amrita’s suffering reminded her it was something she needed to do.

Amrita sat still on her rock. Around her it seemed the entire world was still and listening to the soft sound of the river’s flow. Its gentle ripples washed against the rock. The sound reminded Amrita of a mantra. She clearly heard the water sounding “Aum.”

She took a leaf, thought about Bindi and then started crying.

“Big girl,” she admonished herself. “Be a big girl, not a crybaby.”

She held the leaf tightly, squeezing away its shape, and then put it in the river, followed by a flower. Then another leaf and another flower. With each new leaf and flower, she got sadder and missed Bindi even more. But the river remained untroubled; it didn’t seem to mind taking all her sadness.

After half an hour Mom murmured, “Time to go. We’ll come back tomorrow.”

By that time Amrita had started to feel some of the river’s serenity. Her body shuddered as she returned to reality. It was startling, like being woken up suddenly. Along with this feeling came the too-familiar feeling of loss.

“I want to sit here longer, Mom,” she pleaded.

Mom insisted, “We’ll come back tomorrow. I promise.”

The next few evenings saw them returning to the riverside. Once, Amrita shared her daily experience of the river’s noises,

“Mom, the flowing water sounds like ‘Aum.’”

Mom answered, “Listen carefully, Amrita, and you will find that it actually sounds like ‘Aum Namah Sivaya’.”

“Why does all this work? I mean it is working, but I don’t understand how.”

“Our life force, the energy of our soul, is like the river flowing freely to the sea. But sometimes we humans get all mixed up in our emotions. That’s like when you see a little whirlpool in the river, where the water just goes round and round in circles. Something that upsets us, like Bindi’s death, can tie our energy into knots. When we sit by the river and offer our thoughts into it, we gradually untie those knots so our pure life force can flow smoothly again.”

That evening Amrita listened more intently to the river and realized that Mom was right; she could hear “Aum Namah Sivaya, Sivaya Namah Aum” as the water ran over the rocks. The sounds of the river helped her relax, and she felt in tune with the perfect universe of divine laws and flawless timing. If asked to explain her feelings that day, she would not have been able to do it. There were no words for the depth of peace she felt, and for the welcome departure of her sorrow over Bindi’s death.

As time went on, Amrita began to feel that serenity and acceptance even during the day, away from the river. She felt a greater understanding of nature, seeing that even death is part of the cosmic plan. After two weeks of Ganga Sadhana, she could even walk past the orange tree without sadness, just with fond memories.

At dinner one evening, she told her parents, “I still really miss Bindi, but I am beginning to understand that death is an important part of life, and I need to accept that and not let my life be taken over by what can’t be changed. I think maybe this is what Bindi came to teach me.”

“That’s an understanding many people never attain, Amrita,” observed her mother. “Bindi has given you a priceless gift. We can be thankful for her presence in our life.”

# Discussion Questions

*Amrita uses the technique of Ganga Sadhana to overcome the grief caused by the death of her puppy. The loss of a pet, the moving away of a friend, or getting a poor mark on a test can all be traumatic experiences, especially for youth who have just begun to experience mature emotional issues. Ganga Sadhana is one among several Hindu techniques which help with emotional healing.*

1. Why was it easier for the parents to accept the puppy's death than for Amrita? Do you think it's always true that the older you are, the easier it is to face such things?
2. Do you have pets or other responsibilities where you are the main caregiver? Explain.
3. There was a foreshadowing at the beginning. Did you catch it? How might foreshadowing ruin a story?
4. What loss has life brought to you? How well did you deal with it?
5. Why did Mom and Amrita do Ganga Sadhana more than once? How could one tell when such a practice had been done enough?
6. Why did her parents let Amrita stay home from school? Have you ever been allowed to stay home for a similar situation?
7. What is the difference between temporary grief and serious depression? Do you agree with Mom's statement: "Sometimes there are just no good answers." Was that a useful answer to Dad's doubts? Why or why not?
8. In your opinion, which is more important, the leaf or the flower?
9. What are two ways the river helped Amrita resolve her grief? Can you list more?



## When the Time Came to Finally Conquer Anger

**R**anjit screamed and cursed, clutching his bloody finger and staring at the ragged hole he had just punched in his bedroom wall. “That was stupid!”

Downstairs, Mom turned off the stove in the kitchen as eight-year-old Badriya clung to her sari. Both had experienced Ranjit’s blind rages before. It was one thing when he was a child throwing a tantrum; it could even seem cute. But his tantrums only grew in intensity and frequency, and now he was fifteen. Mom and Dad had tried and tried to teach him how to control his anger, but without success. They only knew it ran deep, and appeared to stem from his sense of frustration that so much of his life was beyond his control. He had trouble with some subjects in school, and found several of his teachers difficult. Rather than deal with the pressures rationally, he lashed out in anger. But what did he expect? He was a teenager and couldn’t have his own apartment, choose his own teachers and go to school on his own.

Mom took off her apron. “Badriya, go outside and play.”

She went upstairs and cautiously approached the partly open door to Ranjit’s room. She knew from experience he was probably still raging mad.

“May I come in?”

“Yes. I hurt my finger,” replied Ranjit, sitting on his bed with a blood-stained towel around his hand. Mom saw the broken lamp on the floor and the jagged hole in the wall.

“How did that happen?”

“I punched the wall, can’t you see that?” Ranjit snapped.

It was a rare thing for Ranjit to be physically violent. Almost

always, his anger had been expressed through harsh words. This escalation had Mom worried.

"I was studying for a history test and just couldn't follow the book anymore. I got angry and threw it at the wall. It hit the lamp and broke it, so I punched the wall. Stupid me. I broke my finger."

"How do you know it's broken?"

"Because I felt it crack, and part of the bone came through the skin, that's how!"

By now, Dad had arrived. Badriya, frightened, had run to him.

"We're going to the hospital," he ordered after a quick look at the finger.

The doctor tending to the wound questioned Ranjit closely about what had happened. He obviously wanted to know if some kind of domestic violence had taken place. Ranjit explained how he punched the wall in a fit of anger. The paint specks and dry-wall dust on his hand convinced the doctor he was telling the truth. As they left, Dad whispered to Ranjit, "That was close. I overheard one of the nurses wondering if she should call Child Protective Services. At first they suspected your injury was the result of a fight."

Ranjit arrived home in a subdued mood, sobered by the thought the police almost got involved. Feeling disoriented from the painkillers the doctor gave him, he went to his room and crashed on his bed. Badriya was already asleep, so Dad and Mom were able to talk privately.

"Do you have any idea what brought this on?" Dad asked.

"He's been in a foul mood most of the week. Some teacher is on his case, he was in a fight with his friend Vijay, and you sent him to his room yesterday for swearing. Today he was upset when he came home from school, but I haven't found out why. It's been building up for a while."

"When I talk to him, it usually just seems to make things worse. It seems I'm part of the problem. Even when he's calm enough to talk rationally, it doesn't last, and there's another

blowup within a week. We put up with it when he was younger, but he has to overcome this. I'm scared that one of these days he will do something rash at school and get expelled, or even arrested."

"I think you should call Guruji about it," said Mom. "Ranjit will have to be home from school for a few days until he's off these painkillers. Maybe the seriousness of this incident will convince him to open up."

The family was among Guruji's close devotees, and he was always available to help with family problems.

"Ranjit got so angry he hit the wall and broke his finger," Dad explained when he reached Guruji on his cell phone. "I'm worried. He's losing control more and more these days."

Guruji paused before replying. "I, too, have been concerned that he has not grown out of his temper tantrums. He's at that difficult adolescent age, but that doesn't justify this behavior. Ask him to call me on my cell. I should talk to him directly. I'll keep you informed."

Ranjit slept in the following morning. At 10 am he crawled out of bed and trudged downstairs.

"Do you want some tea, Ranjit?" Mom asked. "You look groggy."

"It's the painkillers, Mom. They're strong. I'll just have some juice."

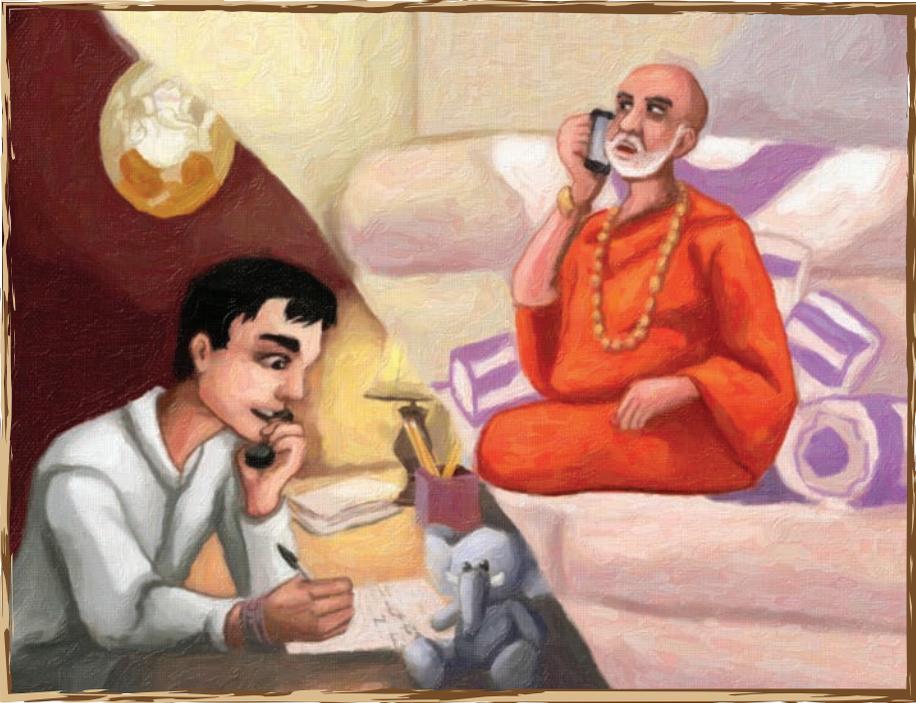
Just then he bumped his hand against the counter and grimaced.

"Wow, I should have found some better excuse to skip a few days of school."

Ranjit's quirky sense of humor came through from time to time, and Mom was happy to see it today. It revealed a keen sense of self-awareness, a trait that might one day help him conquer his anger.

"At least I don't have to put up with Mr. Robinson today."

"What does he do, Dear?" she asked, hoping to find out what had set him off.



“Oh, he’s one of those teachers who gives us pop quizzes after not explaining things very well.”

“I remember that type. I had some, too, and they were frustrating. Is that what was bothering you yesterday?”

“That and a bunch of other crap.”

Normally Mom might have said something about the language, but she knew today wasn’t the day for that. “Like what?”

“Oh, lots of things. Mr. Robinson’s history class with homework I don’t understand. The fight with Vijay—he’s still mad at me. In Phys Ed we had to run extra laps because some kids weren’t putting any effort into it. Then I got in a huge argument with my lab partner in chemistry. Then Dad got mad at me for swearing and sent me to my room. I can’t do anything about any of it! What do people expect of me? Then to top it off, I’m stupid enough to go break a lamp, punch a stupid hole in the wall, break my stupid finger, and Dad has to take me to the hospital, which I bet cost a lot of money.”

She laughed. “That does sound pretty awful. But don’t worry

about the money, your hand was insured.”

Then she paused. “But I don’t think the wall was.”

He smiled at her and laughed, too, but there was a desperate feeling to the conversation. The violence of last night continued to vibrate in the home’s inner atmosphere. Ranjit had a bit to eat, then went back to bed. Later in the afternoon, Mom checked in on him and found him still in bed, sitting up, reading a book for English class.

That evening at dinner, Dad broached the subject hesitantly, “Ranjit, I talked to Guruji. He wants you to call him—maybe even tonight if you’re up to it.”

To his parents’ surprise, Ranjit agreed. “Sure. I can guess what it’s about. Not sure if it’ll do any good, but it’s obvious I need to do something. Not much use breaking more fingers.”

Dad caught Mom’s hopeful expression. Once dinner was over and Ranjit had gone upstairs, phone in hand, Mom said, “I think something has changed. He was nicer today. Maybe last night was a blessing in disguise.”

“I hope so. But it could just be the painkillers knocking the fight out of him.”

“I want him to change,” said Badriya, adding her opinion even though she didn’t know exactly what was going on. Her brother had turned his anger on her before, and it scared her. He had never struck her, but she just didn’t trust him anymore.

“Namaste. This is Guruji. I’m so glad you called, Ranjit. I haven’t seen you for a while. You must be a big boy now.”

“I’m fifteen, and five foot ten. I think I was twelve when we visited last.”

“Yes, that’s about right. So, your Dad asked me to talk with you. Do you know why?”

“I can guess. Yesterday I got so angry, I punched the wall and broke my finger. That was so dumb.”

“Are you willing to talk about it?”

“Yes, Guruji, I am.” He remembered Guruji, and the respect

everyone had always shown him, but this was their first one-on-one conversation. It was exciting, despite the reason for it.

“Well, Ranjit, nobody wants you going through life like this, not me, not your parents, not even you. You have to learn to control your anger. That’s pretty clear, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Ranjit agreed.

“Next time you might punch a person instead of a wall, and then you could be calling me from jail.”

“So what can I do about it?”

“It will be difficult, but eventually you’ll have to realize that the world is as it is, and everything happens for a purpose. You need to learn to react to anything that happens with patience, kindness and understanding, not anger and violence.”

“Knowing my past, that sounds difficult.”

“It is, but we will take it one step at a time. Do two things for me. First, write down all the times you got mad last week—all the little mads, like not getting a grade you wanted to get in school, and all the big mads, like what happened yesterday. Then, this week, keep track of each time you get mad or feel like getting mad. At the end of the week, email me your list—and then call me the next day. Can you do that?”

“Yes. I’ll do my best.” “What’s the second thing?”

“You need to take responsibility for the property damage. I want you to search the Internet and find out how to repair the hole in your wall, and then do your best to fix it. I’m sure your dad or mom will help, but it is important that you do most of the work.”

“That makes sense,” agreed Ranjit.

“That’s it for today. Next week we’ll take another step.”

“Okay ... thank you,” Ranjit said and ended the call.

“So, how was Guruji?” Mom inquired.

“Good. He gave me two assignments for now. One is to start fixing the wall and the other is write down everything I get mad about.”

The next morning, a Saturday, he used the family's computer to research how to repair drywall. After learning what he needed, he talked to Dad. "Once my hand gets better, can you take me to the building supply place? I'll need to buy some stuff. I don't suppose you have drywall tools, do you?"

"No, but we can buy some," offered Dad.

Ranjit went back to school on Monday, but dutifully started his incident list between classes. By noon he had thirty items from the last week. He wrote down being irritated by the noise two kids were making in class while the teacher was explaining something really complicated, the fight with his lab partner and the poor score they got on their project, and a bunch of silly things like being upset because his favorite T-shirt was still in the laundry. The list was longer than he had anticipated. He stared at it for quite a while, pondering why he got angry so often.

The list for the current week was not as long. He did write down how he was annoyed with all the kids asking him about his taped hand, and that his lab partner got on his nerves again. He sent Guruji the list on Thursday, wondering what he would say about it. It was hard to wait a whole day before calling him.

"Hello, Ranjit, I'm glad you called back. I got your list yesterday. Pretty long, I would say, and I've seen some long lists."

"Yeah, I know."

"So, now you have to re-read the list. I want you to look at each item on there, and ask yourself, 'Was anger useful in this situation?' Take a good, hard look at each one."

"I think I know the answer already."

"Yes, I'm sure you do. Anger is really a useless emotion, a reaction belonging to the instinctive or animal part of our nature. It always makes things worse and never makes them better. Was even one single thing on your list fixed or even lessened by getting angry about it?"

"No," admitted Ranjit, "nothing really changed, except to get worse."

"I want you to keep that in mind this week. But don't worry if something comes up you find annoying. There's certainly no point in getting angry about getting angry, now is there?"

"I should think not."

"I want you to catch the moment just before the anger starts to take over, and watch what is happening in your mind. Do you think you can do that?"

"I'll try my best."

"The second assignment for this week is also about awareness. The way I see it, every part of the mind exists all of the time—happiness in one part, sadness in another, anger in yet another. If we become aware of the happy part, then we are happy. If we become aware of the sad part, we're sad. And if we become aware of the angry part, we are angry. Nothing has changed about the mind; our awareness simply went to a different area. This is the key to self-control. With practice, you can move your awareness where you want to go. Happiness, sadness, anger, all those things—those are not you, they're just things you become aware of for a while."

"I was totally aware of the pain in my finger when I broke it."

"Yes, that's a good example. But you're not your finger, are you?"

"Nope," agreed Ranjit, "but I'm absolutely amazed at how much it hurts, and the fact that I can't use my hand at all because of what is a really a minor injury."

"So it's a good thing you're not your finger," laughed Guruji.

"Sure is," Ranjit chuckled.

"And it's a good thing you're not anger. You are not an angry person, you're just someone who has developed a habit of letting awareness get into the angry area of the mind."

"I think I understand what you're saying," Ranjit said uncertainly.

"Mostly, from what I see on your list, you get angry when you're frustrated. You want something to happen differently than it is happening, and instead of being patient with the situation, or

going to the part of the mind that is always patient, you get angry. That's a choice you make."

"Yes, I see that, especially with my little sister. She's just a child, and I go and yell at her. How stupid is that? Does no good at all; it just upsets her."

"Do you want to be the kind of person who gets angry with people and upsets them?"

"No, I don't."

"Then," replied Guruji, "work with me to change the way you behave."

"Yes, Sir." Ranjit really appreciated that Guruji talked to him as an adult, and did not talk down to him as an out-of-control teenager, even if he might deserve it.

When Ranjit called again the following Friday, Guruji jumped right in. "I'm going to explain several specific exercises to deal with anger. The first you already heard about, understanding that the world is a perfect place where everything happens for a purpose. Say to yourself when you feel anger coming on, 'The world is a perfect place. The world is a perfect place.' Second, think of the blue color of the sky, and feel that color filling your whole body."

"I understand about saying the world is a perfect place, but how does the blue color help?"

"Anger is red in color. If I looked at you when you were angry, I would see red flashes in your aura. Blue is the opposite color. It may sound strange, but just visualizing blue can reduce anger. I want you to try that each time you feel anger coming on."

"OK."

"And one more thing for this week ... Can you get a picture of Mr. Robinson?"

"No problem. Then what?"

"Every day for a month, place a flower in front of his picture, and say out loud, 'Aum Namasivaya.' Think about him in a kindly way. He's Siva, too, you know."

"That's going to be hard."

“Yes, I know. But it will be good for you. It’s called the flower penance. This works when you’ve been angry with one person over a long period of time.”

“Anything else?”

“Another method is to skip a meal when you get angry. That teaches the subconscious mind there are consequences to getting angry. It is a form of self-discipline. There are more methods for anger management, but we can leave them aside for now. Practice these for a month. Then if we need more we can talk about other methods. Different medicines for different ailments.”

“And for different people,” added Ranjit.

“Yes, that too. Good night, Ranjit.”

Equipped with some real strategies, Ranjit felt confident as he headed back downstairs. Walking past the den, he noticed Dad was away on another overnight business trip, leaving him with more responsibility than he wanted around the house. He felt a surge of energy in his forehead, “Uh-oh,” he thought, “after I do the flower penance for Mr. Robinson, I have to do it for Dad.”

The next day, he really did get angry, over a change in class at school.

“All right,” he said to himself, “time for serious measures. No lunch for you!”

Skipping lunch wasn’t that hard, until about 3pm when he got really hungry. When he finally sat down for dinner, he wolfed down the soup and potatoes. “I have to avoid doing that very often!” he mumbled to himself.

Somehow Ranjit managed to offer a flower to Mr. Robinson’s picture every day for a month, and he started to notice a change in Mr. Robinson. Suddenly everything the teacher was doing in class made sense. Ranjit just had to work a little harder to get it.

Of course, Mr. Robinson hadn’t changed—Ranjit had.

He started to get most of the remedies to work, not necessarily on the first try—he had to skip several meals—but after a while it clicked. The visualization of blue light was really useful, because

as soon as he felt anger coming on, he had something he could do immediately to calm himself. That kept the anger from building to a rage, which would be much more difficult to handle.

Guruji had more remedies—like putting money in a jar every time you swear, or visualizing Lord Ganesha, but the one Ranjit adopted next was performing secret kindly acts for someone—Badriya, who had suffered on the fringes of his anger all these years. Look how much he hurt his finger from one silly moment of anger. How much more had he hurt his sister each time he yelled at her?

He found things she had been looking for and put them in a place she couldn't miss. He did extra cleanup after dinner so she had less to do. He filled up her bicycle tires when she wasn't around. Little things that helped change their relationship. "Why should this little girl suffer because of me?" he thought. "I have been insensitive and selfish." Seeing himself through his sister's eyes changed Ranjit more than anything else, .

One evening about six months after the broken finger incident, Badriya was sitting at the kitchen table drawing. Ranjit noticed how small and innocent she looked. Sitting down beside her, he noticed she didn't cringe like she used to when he came near. Nor did Mom turn to watch him cautiously, as she had the last couple years, worried he might start berating her daughter over some silly thing.

"Want to come and watch TV with me?" he asked.

Amazingly, it was the first time he had ever asked her that. "Okay," she said, with only the slightest twinge of hesitation.

"You decide what program we watch, okay?"

Ranjit noticed Mom taking it all in, smiling, with tears in her eyes. Impulsively, he went over and hugged her. "Tell Dad thanks for calling Guruji, okay?"

# Discussion Questions

*When Ranjit gets angry enough to injure himself, he realizes he has a problem. With his parents' support and Guruji's counseling, he learns several methods to deal with his problem. These methods vary quite a bit from one another, and some may work better for one person than another. But with a positive attitude, it is possible to control one's emotions, even something as strong as anger.*

1. For you, when does something switch from minor annoyance to full-blown anger?
2. Why did Guruji want to speak with Ranjit directly?
3. Do you know people who, in your opinion, have anger management issues? What have you observed?
4. Why does it sometimes take a bigger event to bring people to recognize a problem?
5. Why were the parents surprised when Ranjit agreed to call Guruji?
6. If you can intellectually understand that anger is useless, why still allow it?
7. Why do you think Guruji gave Ranjit several methods?
8. Which of these strategies do you think would work best for you personally: flower penance, self-imposed loss of privilege, fasting, aura color changing, secretly helping someone else?
9. Do you know of other anger management strategies not mentioned here? What are they? Explain how each one works.
10. What are some physical signs you can recognize in yourself or others that indicate anger is coming on?
11. Why is an angry-free life to be sought for?





## Managing Life after Our Parents' Divorce

I was so relieved when Dad finally moved out. In fact, I had no problem helping him carry his stuff to the car. I know that's a horrible thing to say, but it's the truth. My little sister Kavita cried when he left, but I didn't shed a tear.

It was over.

Finished.

Done.

So we thought and hoped and prayed.

I first noticed Mom and Dad had issues ten years back when I was only six. I didn't even know what it was about, just that I didn't like it when they argued in the kitchen. They stopped yelling when Kavita started crying, and for a while they tried to hide their fights from both of us. She was only four and didn't understand what was going on. She would know soon enough—it wasn't long before their disagreements were common knowledge to all of us. It was money, relatives, what Mom made for dinner—just about anything and everything. Some days I thought they would fight over the last apple in the fridge.

The one thing I never did see was physical violence, to my relief. I had heard plenty of stories about that sort of thing from other kids at school.

When Dad finally moved out, I felt set free. I was sure our home life would improve.

Well, "Silly me," as my little sister would say.

I knew plenty of kids at school whose parents had divorced. After all, half of all marriages in the US end that way, leaving one million kids a year in "broken homes" just like mine was now.

My friend Alex got so upset about his parents' divorce that he started getting in serious trouble. His mom actually had to take him out of school. I have no idea where he is now. He might be in jail, for all I know.

Don, a year older than me, became completely withdrawn. He didn't even want to talk to his old friends anymore. He had found out his parents were in a custody battle over him. It wasn't what you might think—the fight was because neither one of them wanted him! That sent Don to a really dark place inside himself. Everybody worried about him, and some people were afraid he might try to kill himself. I tried to stay close and console him, but it was hard because he was so unwilling to communicate.

The school soon learned my parents were splitting up. There's a lot of legal stuff involved—who can pick us up at school, who is responsible for medical permissions, and so on. Once two divorced parents showed up at the same time to pick up their daughters, Jane and Denise, and got into such a big fight that the principal called the police. What a mess! The mother was arrested for assault, and both parents were banned from the school. After that those poor girls kept getting weird looks. Most of us were able to keep our parents' divorces more or less private, but for them it was public knowledge, and people did talk, the kind of talk that doesn't help anyone involved.

Mrs. Burte, the school counselor, invited us to join one of the "children of divorce" meetings they hold during sixth period. The meetings were useful, but I couldn't help noticing something—even those who seemed to be coping well had this big empty space inside them that anyone could feel. Of course, some were far worse at handling it than others. One kid cried at every meeting. Others were really good at hiding it. Once, shortly after a meeting, I went to the washroom and Pete was in there crying and yelling. Then some teacher unfamiliar with his situation came in and yelled at him some more. The kid couldn't win.

"Sushil," Mrs. Burte told me at the first meeting, "It's not your

fault.” Then later, “Don’t take sides.” And, “You can deal with this.” Good advice, as far as it went. But saying it or hearing it was a long way from actually feeling it or acting on it.

I’m not complaining; those meetings meant a lot to me and Kavita. They were one of the things that helped us keep it together. For me, even having Kavita there was a good thing. I felt like I had a new role some days: her substitute dad. And as I got a grip on my own situation, I like to think I helped some other kids, too.

Because we’re Hindus, the two of us responded differently to the divorce than other kids. I knew from my Hinduism classes that whatever comes to me in my life is part of my karma. So does that mean the divorce was my fault? Or that I deserved this?

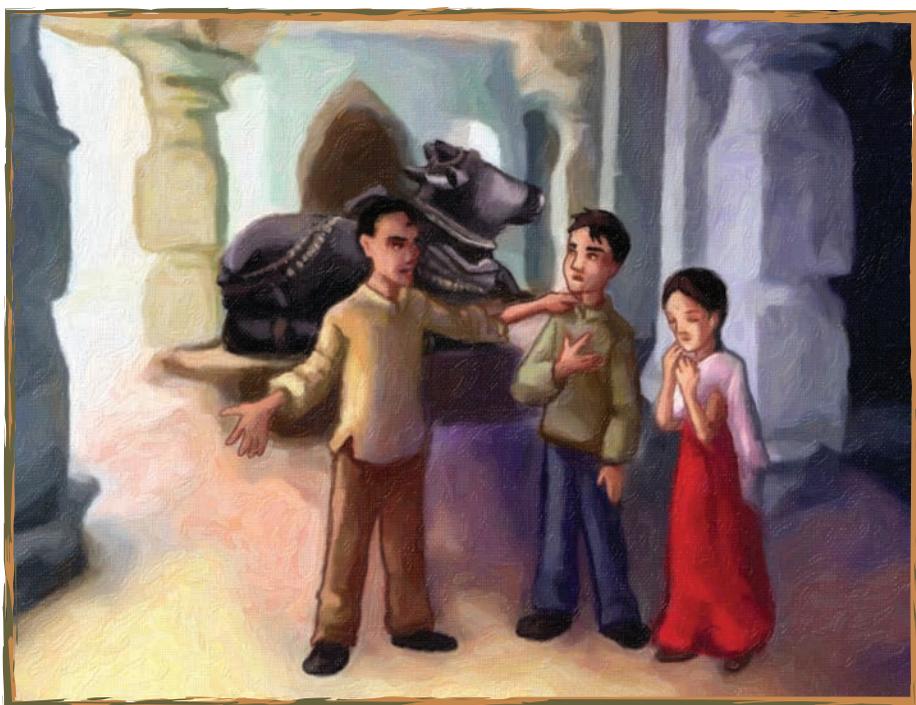
Those questions gnawed at me as the full fallout of the divorce became clear.

First of all, childhood was over for Kavita and me. So were “Mom and Dad,” because these two people, each now leading the independent lives they apparently so wanted, were not the same anymore. “Mom and Dad” were gone. In their place were “Madhu” and “Nikhil,” two people I thought I knew but obviously did not.

I learned from the other kids in our meetings that before long Mom and Dad might each start a new relationship—even remarry—and we might suddenly have a step mom and step dad. For Dad, that might already be starting; Mom had always suspected he was fond of Rekha, his pretty and much younger secretary. Was she going to become my step mom? The very woman who broke up our family?

This was definitely not going to be easy. Go ahead, google “wicked stepmother.” You’ll get half a million hits. “Evil stepmother” will get you another quarter million—so don’t tell me it isn’t something to worry about.

Another recurring worry was that when we grew up we wouldn’t be able to keep our own marriages together, or would even get married. In the back of my mind, I wondered if it would be easier for me to divorce someday, rationalizing, “If Dad did it,



so can I.” Kavita was frightened of the thought of getting married. The prospect of one day becoming a single mom didn’t sit well with her. She started trying harder in school, convinced that she should get a solid profession, just in case. The ordeal of experiencing a divorce eroded our confidence in marriage as a lasting institution. We saw first hand how it can fail.

A month after our parents separated, Uncle Shivesh, my father’s brother, returned from a year’s posting at his company’s headquarters in India. He was our favorite uncle and had been an important part of our religious life ever since we went on pilgrimage with him three years ago to some of the most sacred temples in South India. That was so incredible, one of the greatest experiences of my life. It was the first time I really felt like a bona-fide practicing Hindu, especially on the morning I sat in the great Siva temple of Tiruvannamalai and felt an overwhelmingly powerful blessing during the puja. I mean, I had been to pujas all my life, and I enjoyed the temple, but I had never experienced anything like that.

After the puja, we spent time wandering throughout the labyrinth of stone. Without Uncle catching on, Kavita and I managed to play a subtle game of hide and seek amongst the stone pillars. Uncle almost panicked when he and I couldn't find Kavita for about ten minutes. I played along that I thought she was lost. Uncle finally caught on we were messing with him, and we all had a good laugh.

The day after he arrived back from India, Uncle took the two of us out—not for ice cream or a movie, but to the Ganesha temple. He had a special archana done for us there. He tried to hide it, but it was obvious he was upset about the breakup. He knew what it meant more than we did, and what else might come.

We found a quiet place and sat together on the floor to talk.

"I'm so sorry to hear about your parents. How are you two doing?"

"Not too well," I had to reply. "I know other kids of divorced parents in school, and I don't want to end up with their problems. What happened, anyway? Aren't Hindu couples supposed to stay married for life? Isn't there a big ceremony when they promise that to each other?"

"Yes, it's called a wedding, Sushil," he said dryly, while smiling. "Christian marriages are also meant to be for life, or they used to be anyway. I heard they changed the vows now, because of so many divorces—no more 'until death do us part.' And even carefully arranged marriages like your parents' don't always work out. It's the stress of modern life. Things have changed a lot."

"Like what?"

"Extended family, mainly. In India, the four of you wouldn't have been living all by yourselves in your own house. Your father's parents, married brothers and their wives, unmarried sisters and all manner of children would have been all in one big house. That's changing in India, and the divorce rate is rising fast there, because the joint family was a major stabilizing force for marriage. Always there was a trusted elder, a brother or sister to talk to, an

auntie to help a couple through rough times. But very little of all that is present here in the West.”

“Right, but what do we do with this mess? Is it some kind of karmic payback? That’s what I learned in Hinduism class.” I trusted that Uncle Shivesh wouldn’t take my bluntness for disrespect.

“A good question, and a big topic. We’ll talk about it now. Then I will ask your mother if we can meet here every Saturday afternoon for a while. I like being in the temple; I think the Gods can hear us.”

“So is it payback, or not?” I insisted.

“Our Guruji talks about karma management, by which he means dealing with rough situations in life. Of course, all the good situations are also the result of karma, but no one ever complains about them, or worries about how to manage them!”

We both laughed, and I felt a little better. After all, we were blood relatives, Uncle and us, and there was no divorce procedure for that relationship. We trusted him to be there.

“To answer your question,” he went on, “yes, it is your karma and in some sense you ‘caused’ it to happen, but—actually there are several ‘buts.’ First, you didn’t cause the divorce to happen through actions in this life, which many children think, especially if they are young. It’s natural for young ones to blame themselves, even when they really had nothing to do with it.”

“My sister and I have certainly caused our parents grief from time to time.”

“Sure, but that’s their karma coming back! You did not cause their divorce in this life. But, ‘cause’ within the idea of karma is a broad concept. When people say, ‘I caused it,’ they mean they did something to directly change a situation.”

“That certainly happened to our family. I overheard one of Mom’s friends tell Mom why she dumped her husband, basically encouraging Mom to do the same. Why would she do that?”

“Good question. Sometimes people say things like that to

justify their own behavior. I can tell you for sure that karma will come back to her one day.”

“You mean, by convincing someone else divorce is the right thing to do, she was also convincing herself she did the right thing?”

“Exactly—you’ve got it.” Uncle was silent for a moment. He looked sad. “It is also possible to cause something by doing nothing when you should have done something.”

“You mean, like why didn’t Mom and Dad’s friends and relatives step in to help more?”

Uncle paused, obviously evaluating his own response to the family problems. “I tried as I could, but being posted in India, I was just so busy, such long hours, the time difference....”

“Uncle, it wasn’t your fault,” Kavita said softly.

“Thank you, Kavita, I appreciate that you’re able to console someone else. But you’re the person who’s been hurt here. What’s happening to you and Sushil is your karma, not in the sense of blame, but in the sense of being an experience to learn from. Guruji often tells us ‘Karma is our teacher.’ That’s the best way to look at this huge change in your life. It’s time to go now. We’ll meet again next Saturday.”

“Thank you, Uncle, this has meant a lot to us.”

We went back to Mom’s house, which was good because we had our own rooms there. Dad could only afford a small apartment, so Kavita and I had to share a bedroom when we visited. The whole situation was so inconvenient. Were we supposed to have two entire sets of clothes, one for each place? And two sets of power adaptors for our computers and other gadgets? Two toothbrushes, two bicycles, two pairs of boots? But the most difficult thing for us was the two different sets of rules and expectations. Dad was more lenient on homework, but Mom was more lenient on bedtime. Lots of things like that. We always had to stop and think, “Where are we today? What are the rules here?” And what difference did these silly rules make anyway, when they

had broken the biggest rule by getting divorced? Why should we do what either of them say?

I gave Uncle's talk a lot of thought, and Kavita and I discussed it that night while Mom was busy in the kitchen. We both understood this was an experience we needed to learn from. But it was very difficult not to blame Mom and Dad for the divorce. What did they think when they were getting married? That they would try living together and see how they liked it? Then having two children, was that just a casual experiment also? You would think children would make the relationship permanent, wouldn't you?

Thanks to Uncle, I understood this was not a situation I was going to fix. It wasn't like standing up to some bully and getting him to back off, or teaching a child to stop teasing kittens. I couldn't say, "Bad Mommy! Bad Daddy! You stop this and get remarried right now!" It was too late, the karma had already manifested full force and I would just have to deal with it for myself and my sister as best I could.

Several of the kids at our school counseling sessions were really angry with whichever parent they thought caused the divorce. Martin, in particular, blamed his father for the family's break up and wanted revenge. He told us that when his dad remarried, he would make the new step mom's life as miserable as possible. I asked Uncle about this at our next meeting in the temple.

"It's a common reaction; but really, what good does it do? All the mean things Martin is saying and doing to his father are just creating more karma for himself. It's rare that a divorce is strictly one-sided. But if his dad really was to blame, then the karma will return to him one day."

"Understanding karma does make it easier to handle injustice, doesn't it," observed Kavita. "We know things happen for a reason and don't feel like we always need to take matters into our own hands."

"Yes, that's right," Uncle said. "And when we understand karma,

we are able to forgive the person.”

“I don’t want to retaliate against Dad,” Kavita said, “even though I do blame him the most. When I see him, he looks so sad. But forgive him? I don’t know if I can do that.”

“It takes a very brave and understanding person to forgive someone who has wronged them, no doubt about it. Give it some time.”

The subject of forgiveness came up in our next school counseling session, and the group was divided. Some said they had found it in their hearts to forgive both parents; others said they would never forgive either of them for the pain they caused. It was sometimes hard for me to figure out if everyone in those sessions was sincere, or if some just said stuff because they thought Mrs. Burte wanted to hear it.

It took me a long time to forgive my parents, but I found a certain peace when I finally did. I could forgive them, but I didn’t condone what they had done. The divorce was hardest on Kavita, really, because we ended up mostly with Mom, while Dad grew more distant over time. She was at the age when a girl really needs her father. I needed him, too, I had to admit.

When I left for college and started living on campus, the pain lessened, because the aftermath of the divorce was no longer a daily experience. I did choose a college close to home, though, because I didn’t want to leave my sister completely on her own. It was now clear that both our parents would likely remarry, and I knew that would be hard for Kavita to deal with.

We had seen a lot of different reactions from the kids in our counseling sessions, few of which we wanted to imitate. Uncle had better answers. Yes, this was our karma to experience, with lessons to be learned that would help us handle future challenges in life. We couldn’t improve the situation by blaming others or complaining about our troubles or by being mean—that would only create more negative karma. Better to react with all the kindness and forgiveness we could muster, and resolve to not do this

to our own kids.

One day, about five years after the big D, we were together with Uncle again. Kavita hadn't said a word for an hour, letting Uncle and me do all the talking.

Suddenly she asked, "Uncle, can you explain to me how Indian arranged marriages are set up?"

Her question surprised me, but Uncle was even more surprised. "I would be honored, Kavita. I was afraid after your parents' divorce that both of you would be soured on marriage."

"I'm not saying I'm even sure I want to get married, or even if I will fall in love with someone. But I've had several crushes that I thought were love, only they didn't last very long. I'm so glad I never got deeply involved with any of those boys! Arranged marriage does seem like a more scientific system, where many factors are considered in advance, and the couple makes a decision based on more than just emotions. People spend more time researching the next car or computer they want to buy than the person they intend to create a family with! I've got friends my age who are already divorced! I'm not going to visit that karma on my children."

"Well, Kavita, to arrange a marriage, I need to put the word out through our relatives and friends that we're looking—and I do mean we, because any prospect has to get past me first! And I do hope you'll find it in your heart to involve your parents in the choice. We will check family background, education, health, personality, shared goals, looks and astrological compatibility. It will be a bit of a process, but if we do it right, we will find the right man for you."

"Thank you, Uncle, I look forward to it!"

# Discussion Questions

*Sushil narrates how he learned to deal with his parents' divorce. He faces a situation that he cannot change, but he can change how he deals with it. To properly manage a difficult life experience requires understanding how karma is created, how it comes back to us, how we should face it and what lessons it can teach us.*

1. What is the divorce rate in your community? Is it something that affects you, or that you think about much?
2. How is talking with people who have similar problems helpful? Have you ever been a member of such a group? Was it effective?
3. Why did Sushil's parents become "Madhu and Nikhil" instead of "Mom and Dad"?
4. Why were the siblings fortunate to have a trusted uncle to talk to?
5. Why do children of divorced couples have a greater chance of becoming divorced themselves?
6. How did Kavita show, at the end of the story, that she intended to stop this karmic cycle? How did her understanding of karma help her shift her awareness to the present and future?
7. To discuss a potential match for your own marriage, would seek someone's help, and if so, who?
8. How would you advise a close friend who wanted to marry someone that you thought was a bad match?
9. Have you gone through a really difficult situation in life that made you a better person? Explain.
10. Have you ever had an experience you strongly felt was a karma from a past life carried into this life? Elaborate.



## Dealing with Desperate Emotions

*Note to readers: The following story deals with a serious subject that may not be suitable for young readers without parental oversight.*

**"**Come on!" said Joey. "You know I meant it as a joke. Some days you have no sense of humor. When you stumbled with your words to Shivani and mumbled 'I ... okay,' it sounded funny."

"What's funny about that?" Lochan shot back. "Okay, I got mixed up. She makes everyone nervous, doesn't she? But you had no right to make fun of me in front of everyone."

Inside Joey's head came a rush of voices. One said, "Don't I have a right to stand up for myself? Why am I always the one to get laughed at?" Then he griped aloud, "But you can make fun of me anytime you want? Really fair, Lochan!"

Then a different voice came, louder, "Don't leave it at that, Dummy. Show him what you're made of."

Joey clenched his fists and squared off with his friend. "But you didn't keep quiet. You told them I signed up for the part of village buffoon in the school play just because Ananya has the lead role. Buffoon, clown, dope—because I'm a natural for the part, you said. What were you thinking when you told them that? Do you think they'll ever forget it? Maybe ten years from now people will be saying, 'Hey, there goes that buffoon.' All because you couldn't keep your stupid mouth shut."

Lochan brushed aside his friend's growing anger. "Well, you *are* a buffoon. Telling everyone I stammered when I just talked to a girl! You're an idiot, brother, a complete loser."

Lochan stomped off, not turning around to look back, and headed home by himself, along the same path the pair usually walked together. Another day, another spat with Joey.

Joey watched him go. They had been good friends since middle school, and usually made up quickly. But now, in tenth grade, something was different. Joey wanted to call Lochan back, but the sense of defeat that had plagued him lately overpowered him. It seemed whenever he and Lochan got into an argument, he always lost. Just one more thing he was a failure at, on top of all the rest. What was the point of even trying?

Joey walked despondently down the long cobbled path, hurting inside. A cold fall wind sent shivers through the tall elms, shedding dead leaves to the ground. As he looked at the forlorn leaves with their shriveled edges, he heard a voice in his head: "While they were on the tree, they were nourished and loved, but now they are cast aside. Life has no time for losers. You are just like a dead leaf, not worthy of love. You can't even earn good grades, you're lousy at sports, and not a single girl has ever liked you."

The tears flowed, falling on his shirt. He thought, "Look at me, crying like a baby! Why can't things go right for once?"

Then another voice came, one he had grown to dread: "Things will never go right for you because you're a loser. You will only get more and more hurt. Better to quit the game."

"Quit the game?"

"Yes, that is best. No one can hurt you then." This voice had grown stronger and louder over the last year. "It's better to quit the game, Joey. You tried, but you are not fit for this world. No one understands you. You don't even understand yourself."

He looked again at the trees. It seemed like the wise old elms were talking to him. Smiling grimly, suddenly he knew what to do. His plan would take but a moment to execute. He had prepared months for it, carefully taking a few of Mom's sleeping pills from the medicine cabinet every few weeks, so she wouldn't

notice. When he got home, he cleaned his room, made the bed, put on his good clothes, swallowed the handful of pills and laid down, placing a note beside him saying only, "I'm sorry."

During dinner, Lochan's cell phone rang. Listening for two seconds, he stammered, "What?" then put the phone down and stared at the wall.

His father looked at him, awaiting an explanation.

"He's dead," Lochan blurted out.

There was silence. Two long minutes.

Finally Dad had to ask, "Who?"

"Joey."

More silence.

When Mom came in from the kitchen, she was stunned by the shock on their faces.

"What happened?"

Dad looked at her, "Lochan said Joey's dead."

"How?"

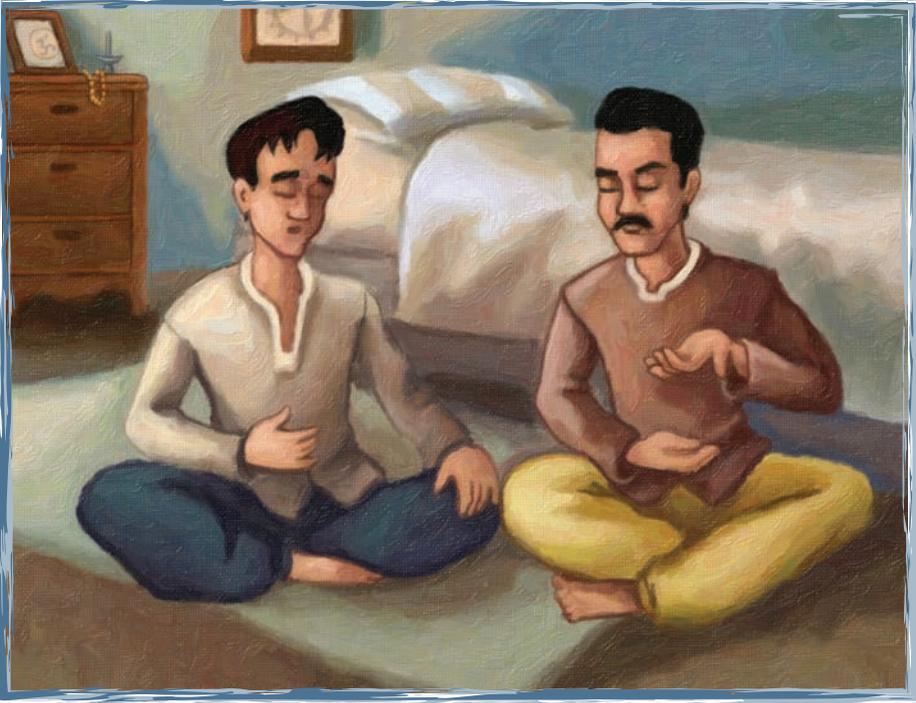
"His mom just called," Lochan answered. "He took pills; the stupid guy."

"That's terrible!" She sank to the floor, sobbing.

Mom's tears released Lochan's own feelings. He abruptly left the table, rushed to his room, buried his head in the pillow and let out a long, mournful, almost inhuman wail. His parents looked at each other, helpless. Dad raised his eyebrows, inclining his head toward Lochan's room, but Mom shook her head. "Not now. Let him cry." Lochan's sobbing continued for fifteen minutes.

Dad looked at his wife, tears still streaming down her face. "What has happened to children these days? Why would he do something so drastic? I can't imagine how his parents feel. It must have been his mother's pills, she's had such insomnia. Now she probably blames herself."

Mom hesitated for a moment, then shared, "She told me just two days ago she thought Joey was more upset than usual. She wanted me to ask Lochan about it. But I told her I was sure it



would blow over. I never talked to Lochan. Maybe I could have found out something and stopped it. How can I ever face her now?”

“I don’t know, I just don’t know. I’ll talk to Lochan after he settles down a bit.”

At about 1am Dad went to his room. There had been silence for awhile, but he had heard rustling. “Can we talk about it?”

His voice quivering, Lochan spoke hoarsely, “Not really, but I guess so.”

“So, did you have any idea?”

“None. All I know is we had a big fight after school today. That’s probably what sent him over the edge. I called him a loser and a buffoon, Dad.”

“This is not your fault, Son.”

“I knew you were going to say that. I’m going to hear that every day from everyone I see for the next two weeks. How do you know it wasn’t my fault?”

“Okay,” consoled Dad. “How can we help then? You want some

tea?”

Lochan moaned, “No. I want to sleep.”

There was a pause before Dad continued. “You remember the pranayama I taught you when you were younger, to calm yourself? Nine counts in, nine counts out?”

“Yes. But I don’t know if I can even count to nine right now. I’ll probably get lost at six. Every second thought is *buffoon* or *loser*.”

“We’ll do it together for a while. It will help us both. Breathe in, one ... two ... three ...”

For the next twenty minutes the rhythmic counting served as a lullaby. Lochan calmed down and finally fell asleep.

He awoke at 3 am trembling, having dreamed he saw Joey floating in the darkness, not asleep, but not awake either. Lochan sat up in bed and started again with the pranayama, more upset now than ever.

At breakfast, Dad offered, “Lochan, you can stay home today if you want to. That would be okay.”

“No. I want to go. I think it’s better I go. Dad, I had a terrible dream about Joey. I saw him just floating in space, not dead, not alive. What did that mean?”

“I had that experience once with a friend of mine who died in an accident. I asked Gururji about it. He explained that sometimes when someone dies, they don’t know they’re dead. The soul has separated from the body, but the person is confused, especially if they have no belief in reincarnation or any kind of afterlife. Gururji said there are people on the other side, the astral plane, whose job it is to ‘wake up’ these people and explain to them what has happened. I think you saw Joey, or Joey’s soul, in that state of suspended animation. I’ve read in Hindu books that after someone commits suicide, their soul goes into that state and might be stuck there for years. Suicide creates a different kind of experience than natural forms of death.”

“So I guess his problems didn’t end when he killed himself.”

“No, he just postponed the karma he was trying to escape. Now

he will have to be reborn to face the same challenges again. That's why Hinduism teaches so strongly against suicide. It doesn't solve anything. And it creates a lot of grief for loved ones; that's a karma, too."

The family finished breakfast without speaking again. As he left the house, Lochan broke the silence with the usual, "See you after school." Somehow the morning routine made him forget for a minute what had happened. He walked down the street toward Joey's house to meet up on the way to school, then snapped back to reality: Joey was dead.

He had to stop at the house—there was no way not to—and say something to Joey's mom. Remembering Dad's advice on pranayama, he started to count in unison with his steps, breathe in one, two, three ... six—as far as he could get on one breath. Then out one, two, three." No question, it was helping, and he felt mostly collected when he reached the door.

He knocked. When Mr. White opened the door, his surreal thought was to ask, as he always did, "Is Joey ready yet?" He clamped his mouth shut to keep the words unsaid.

Joey's dad threw his arms around Lochan and hugged him tightly. "I'm so sorry," he whispered.

"Me, too."

Mr. White released him and Lochan stepped back.

"How's his mom?"

"Not good, she hasn't stopped crying. She blames herself for leaving the pills around, blames herself for not seeing it coming, just blames herself."

"I had a big argument with Joey yesterday. I think it was my fault," Lochan choked out.

Mr. White hugged him again. "No, Lochan, we found a journal he had been keeping. He had thought about this for a long time. Let's not think about blame right now."

"I'm going to school today. I think I should be there."

"Bless you, son."

When he got back to the sidewalk, the breathing with the steps seemed to kick in automatically. He remembered his Dad's soft voice from the night before, "One ... two ... three ...," and felt grateful his parents could teach him things like this.

School was nuts. Crazy nuts. Some kids knew of the tragedy, but most didn't. Whispering, crying, shocked looks in abundance. Some adults he had never seen before were standing around watching and listening. He continued trying to concentrate on breathing. A mutual friend, Devon, came over and said, "Hey, man, I'm sorry about what happened. I know you were really close."

Lochan responded, "Don't worry, I'm okay," even though he didn't feel okay at all. He just wanted to be left alone.

Just then, Mrs. Jenkins, the school counselor, caught up with him and said kindly, "Come with me to my office, Lochan."

As they passed a group of boys, he overheard, "Hey, maybe we'll get a day off." Another boy said, "Sleeping pills! What a sissy way to die, he should've gotten a gun and died like a man." Mrs. Jenkins turned and gave the group a stern look. When she and Lochan got to her office, five other kids were already there, along with a stranger. Lochan sat in the last empty chair.

Mrs. Jenkins spoke, "The staff met briefly this morning and decided to bring Joey's closest friends together. Mr. Johnson will be making an announcement shortly to the whole school about what happened, just so rumors don't fly about." Then she turned to the stranger who was quietly watching them all. "This is Dr. Adams. He's one of the school district's psychologists and head of the district's grief team. He's here to help us—students and staff alike."

Lochan shook his head and asked, "You mean this happens so often the school district has a team to deal with it?"

Dr. Adams didn't respond.

Lochan looked at him. "Sorry, that was uncalled for. We're all thankful you are here."

He realized, perhaps for the first time, that he wasn't the only

person affected. There were dozens. He closed his eyes and began the pranayama.

The principal, Mr. Johnson, announced over the PA system that Joey White had committed suicide the night before. A team of counselors would be at the school today and the rest of the week.

Everyone looked to Dr. Adams. He spoke calmly. "I didn't know Joey at all, or much about him, but I would like to. Maybe we can make our way around the room, and each of you can say a bit about him. That way if some other student approaches me, I'll have a clue."

Mrs. Jenkins started. "I met Joey two years ago right here in my office. He came in quite a bit, off and on. I liked him, so intelligent, so intuitive. I think if we tossed out our roles here as teacher and student, he would have been my friend. Someone I would like as a friend."

When it was Lochan's turn, all he could say was, "He was my best friend, until last night."

Soon they were sharing a few stories, some funny, some sad, all with the common denominator—Joey, and the fact that no one saw this coming.

Dr. Adams then got down to some practical methods to help with grief. "I thought I would go over some basic breathing exercises that can help in these situations."

Lochan smiled and let out a chuckle. When Mr. Adams looked at him curiously, he explained, "I'm a Hindu. We call it pranayama. Breathing exercises. My dad got me using them last night to calm down and fall asleep. I used to do it more when I was younger. Like before tests and stuff."

"You're probably going to teach me a thing or two then," said Dr. Adams. "And all this time I thought I would have something important to pass on. You've already experienced how pranayama works?"

"Well, I did get some sleep last night. Without it, I probably

wouldn't have. Dad says the emotions are tied to the breath. When we get upset, our breathing changes, becoming irregular or harsh. It's not obvious, but the reverse also works—calm the breath and the emotions follow. The breath is the one function in the body that we can consciously control, if we want, and takes care of itself the rest of the time. And when we control the breath, we control awareness at the same time. That's what my dad says.”

“Interesting. We psychologists know it works, but this is the first logical explanation I've heard as to how.”

The session ended after another half hour. As the group left, Dr. Adams asked Lochan to stay. “If you don't mind, can you also tell me the Hindu view on suicide? That's something else I really should know.”

“We believe in karma and reincarnation. After death, the soul does not disappear. It is born again and takes up where it left off. We all have certain karmas we need to experience, and they can't be escaped by cutting our life short. We have to come back again, in another life, and face the same challenges again that led to the suicide.” He decided against explaining how Joey was in a miserable state in the afterlife; that might be a bit much for everyone in the room to process. Instead he asked, “How do you deal with people who blame themselves for a suicide? Isn't it a fact that at least some of them are to blame?”

“Tough question. In one case, a girl was driven to suicide by a highly critical mother. It was almost like a murder. Frankly, I had no idea how to deal with that one. I actually asked a judge friend of mine if there was a way to charge the mother. But, to answer you directly, yes, there is often plenty of blame to go around.”

“I feel like this was my fault. Joey was my best friend, but yesterday we exchanged a lot of mean words. I called him a bunch of names. Four hours later he was dead. I can put two and two together.”

Dr. Adams paused. “You know, normally I wouldn't share this, but right now it just feels like I should.... Mrs. Jenkins feels it's

her fault, too.”

Lochan asked, almost defiantly, “Why would she think that? She hardly knew him.”

“Yes, she did. Yesterday she had to cancel a counseling appointment with him. An emergency came up with another student, so she canceled on Joey. I spent ten minutes with her this morning trying to convince her she is not to blame. That’s how these things are, Lochan. I bet you his mom thinks it’s all her fault. His dad, too. Probably a couple other students. Everyone close to him thinks it’s their fault. Thankfully, suicide is a rare response to the problems of life. As you point out, it doesn’t solve anything. I just hope after something like this everyone learns to be a bit more kind and understanding toward others.”

That afternoon, classes slowly returned to normal. For Lochan, all reminders of Joey became reminders to breathe: his locker, the empty desk in science class, the graded test that Mr. Smart forgot to remove from the pile when he was handing them out. He mumbled an uncomfortable, “Oops” instead of “Joey.” But everybody noticed. Lochan wondered what Joey’s mark was, but didn’t ask.

Joey was cremated the next day. His mother spread his ashes in the river that runs beside the town. The following Monday a public memorial was held for him at school. Lochan was asked to give a eulogy. He learned from Dr. Adams that a eulogy is a short testimony about a person’s life, usually personal stories that help everyone remember the deceased in a positive way.

Over the weekend Dad and Lochan worked on summary notes for the talk. Lochan stood in front of a mirror and rehearsed. After Dad watched his son go through it once, with lots of emotional pausing, he instructed, “Same for this, watch your breathing.”

The service was set for 2 pm. Lochan looked up towards the school entrance, in front of the gym. He saw Joey’s parents and relatives enter just ahead of his own parents. The gym was packed but strangely quiet. This was no lively basketball game.

Students and family had created a memorial shrine on a low platform, slightly above the wooden floor. He had never seen so many flowers around a picture in his life. But he couldn't look. Instead, he stared at his notes and counted mentally, "One... two... three..."

When Mr. Jenkins called Lochan's name, he stood, walked past the shrine to the podium, laid out his notes, took a deep breath and began.

"I met Joey White eleven years ago, when I was six." Lochan talked about walking to school, the day in third grade they had skipped school together, the summer at Ocean City with Joey's parents. He shared one of his friend's favorite jokes: "Principal Johnson got a call one day. 'Hello,' he said. 'My daughter won't be in school today,' stated the caller. 'May I know who this is?' asked Mr. Johnson. 'This is my mother speaking.'" Everyone groaned.

"He was my friend, but I had a big fight with him the day he died. Why did I do that? I was almost bullying him, my friend, my best friend..."

Lochan collected himself and continued, talking for almost ten minutes. He concluded by saying, "Goodbye, Buddy. I'll really miss you."

Walking back to his seat past Joey's mother, he saw her teary smile. When he sat down, Mrs. Jenkins leaned over and whispered, "That was just beautiful."

By the time the crowd dispersed, he had received several hugs from ladies he didn't know. He asked Dad. "Is it okay if I walk home? I think I need some alone time."

Mrs. Jenkins looked worried. Dad knew what was on her mind. "Don't worry," he said. "Lochan's OK."

As he walked along the familiar path alone, Joey thought back to the great times, the wonderful memories, and realized he could have talked for an hour back there.

A gust of wind blew elm leaves on the path. He bent over, picked one up, and held it in his hand. The browned, forlorn edges had no life. He crunched it in his hand, feeling the crisp, dry

remnants on his palm. Then he turned to the tree and closed his eyes. In his mind he saw the tree in spring, its vibrant leaves sending the smell of life-giving prana his way. Again he breathed a deep, steady breath, letting the moist fresh air fill his lungs. He opened his eyes, smiled and continued home.

Mom and Dad were waiting at the table. The sweet smell of tea danced through the room.

“How are you, Son?”

“I’m fine, Dad, and thank you.”

“For what? We only did what any loving parents would do.”

“No, you did much more. You taught me pranayama, and that helped me get through this tragedy.”

“That’s true. It does help calm the nerves, doesn’t it?”

“It does a lot more than that, Dad. It allows you to be a watcher. When you breathe like that all day, you see things from a different perspective, perhaps a more spiritual perspective. I saw how everyone is different in grief. You watch, you learn. You don’t react so emotionally. Pretty cool, I would say.”

Dad just nodded and sipped his tea.

Before class the next morning, Lochan walked straight and steady down the long hallway to the drama office. The teacher looked up in surprise from his script-filled desk.

“Do you need someone for the role of village idiot in the school play?” Lochan asked.

# Discussion Questions

*When Lochan's best friend Joey commits suicide, the tragedy brings intense stress and emotional pain for those who knew him. Lochan's father teaches him a simple method of breath control (pranayama in Sanskrit) which helps him keep his emotions under control as he faces his friend's father, his teachers and classmates. Breath control is a key practice of Hinduism and yoga, used in situations like this to control wild emotions and also in meditation to quiet the mind.*

1. Why do you think Joey committed suicide?
2. Have you ever known anyone who committed suicide? What caused them to make such a drastic decision?
3. Were his/her family and friends to blame?
4. In the story, Lochan is told not to blame himself, but what do you think?
5. In the Hindu view, what happens to someone who commits suicide?
6. Have you ever practiced pranayama as described in the story? Try it for five minutes, take your pulse before and after, and discuss the effect it had. Try it again later when you find yourself excited or upset about something.
7. How can you tell when you've done enough pranayama? Five minutes? Half an hour?
8. Why should breathing and the emotions have a connection? How does the breathing change with certain emotions, such as anger?
9. Have counselors ever been brought in at your school to help students with a traumatic situation? How well did it work? Would you find such counseling useful?
10. What does it mean to be "a watcher?"



## Rocky Times Made Me Appreciate My Family

**W**hen Dad said I had to stop taking dance lessons, I stopped paying attention to what else he was saying. Not do dance? That was so unfair. That was the only thing I was allowed to do just for me. Without dance, it would be school, housework, homework and then school again. I didn't waste time or money at the shopping center like most of my classmates. I barely had any activities outside school. I couldn't believe I was being asked to give up the one thing that made me feel good all over.

Once our parents left the room, my brother Palani started talking, "Can you believe that, Sahana? Dad's partner took all his clients, and the business may fail. We might even lose our house! This can't be happening. What if we just do all the other things Dad said—no cable TV, no allowances, no new clothes...." His voice trailed off, a blank look on his face.

"Is that what Dad said?" Lost in my own distress, I had missed a lot of the conversation. Dad had just called me and my brothers, Palani and Ganesha, ages 11 and 4, to a family meeting. Mom was there, too, of course, but her expression made it clear it was Dad who would be explaining things. I caught the first part about his income being a lot lower now, but lost focus when he mentioned giving up dance.

Clearly Palani had been paying attention. He started in again in a loud voice. "I can't believe this! How am I supposed to fit in at school? People already think I'm weird because I'm not allowed to play video games. At least I could talk to my friends about TV shows, except the best ones, which we're not allowed to watch."

He paced the room.

“Shh, stop yelling. You’ll get in trouble,” I warned.

But his concerns gave me more to think about. It wasn’t just dancing I would be giving up. It would be the hard-earned “fitting in.” When we moved to this country five years ago, I was ten, while Palani was only six. At that age, he didn’t have the trouble I had at school. When I started in elementary school, most of the other kids had known each other for years. Add to that my Indian accent, brown skin, different clothes and food, and I remained an outsider until I switched to middle school in seventh grade. So far, things had gone along as well as could be expected for a new citizen. But now I wouldn’t just be one of a few Indian girls at school, I would be the poor Indian girl who couldn’t afford field trips or new clothes. With one conversation, everything about my life was suddenly uncertain. What would become of our family?

A week later, after school, there was a note from Mom:

*I am working an evening shift.*

*Sahana, please make dinner.*

*Palani, do the next page of Ganesh's letter book with him.*

*Love, Mom*

Mom worked as a nurse, usually about once a week to keep up her skills and stay on the hospital payroll. But now, with Dad’s decline in income, she began taking extra shifts. We didn’t know when we got home from school if she would be there or not.

“Ugh, I have to cook!” I complained to Palani.

“Ha ha!” he laughed, imitating a character from *The Simpsons*.

“You have to help Ganesh with his letters,” I chided.

“But I have homework!” Palani whined—the first time I had ever heard him use homework as an excuse. “And Ganesh’s books are so boring.”

“You mean they’re too hard for you?” I teased.

Palani glared back.

“Why don’t you set up your books on the dining room table and do your homework while you help Ganesh?”

“Fine,” he sighed.

I looked for something to cook. There was no way I was cooking a fancy Indian meal, even though I could. There was some pasta and bottled tomato sauce in the pantry. That would be quick and easy.

I knew Dad had arrived when I heard him call out to Palani to pick up his jacket. “You need to take better care of your things,” he said—implying, I concluded, that he would not be buying us new clothes for a long time.

I took refuge in the kitchen, pretending to be fascinated with the pasta and sauce pots. After I heard Dad go upstairs, I peeked into the dining room. Ganesh was staring intently at his book, crayon in hand. Palani had rejoined him after putting his jacket away. He looked at me and gestured towards the upper floor. I shrugged. When he didn’t look away, I walked over to check on what they were doing. Palani was involved in math homework and Ganesh was doing an exercise where you select the pictures that start with the letter “L.”

“Thanks for helping out,” I said to Palani. “Good job, Ganesh. You’re getting better at that.” He smiled.

“Is there something wrong with Dad?” Palani asked. “Do you think he’s mad at me?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know if he notices us at all.” A hissing sound came from the kitchen and I ran back to find the pasta boiling over.

“Shoot!” I turned off the heat and started mopping up the stove. I would clean it thoroughly when it cooled down.

A few minutes later, Dad appeared. “Where’s your mother?”

“She has an evening shift,” I said as I strained the pasta.

“Oh right, I forgot. Pasta for dinner?”

He sounded disappointed. I knew Dad and Mom liked

Western food less than we kids did, but it was easy to make.

"Yes. It's ready."

"Palani, Ganesh, please get your books off the table," Dad called out a little more loudly than needed. I think he was trying to be helpful, but he sounded irritated.

"But Dad, we're not finished."

"It's time for dinner."

"Fine!" Palani slammed his book closed and pulled Ganesh's book out from under his hand, resulting in a big streak of crayon.

"Look what you made me do!" Ganesh cried.

"Ganesh, help your sister bring the dishes," Dad ordered.

"That's okay, Dad, it's almost ready," I replied, while grumbling to myself. The boys would never offer to help on their own. Neither would Dad, for that matter.

We ate in awkward silence. Palani glared at Dad, who was eating so quickly I don't think he even tasted the food. "He's lucky I cooked anything," I thought. Ganesh ate so slowly. Dad hadn't noticed Palani and Ganesh working together. All he saw was that they were in the way of serving dinner. He finished quickly and took his plate to the kitchen.

"Don't forget to clean the stove, Sahana," he called, then went back to the computer, where he had spent nearly every evening for the last week.

I couldn't take it anymore. But I knew not to say anything within Dad's hearing. "Couldn't even bother to thank me," I huffed to the boys.

"I hate this family!" Palani said, quick to anger as always.

"Yeah!" Ganesh agreed, banging his fork on the table.

Our family wasn't tense before Dad's business troubles. Was this what we had to look forward to from now on?

At school the next day I told my best friend Sarah about my problems, about how it didn't matter what I do, that Dad either complains or ignores us.

"It started with his trouble at work. He lost a lot of his

accounting clients and is now making a lot less money.”

“That must be hard on him,” she said.

I was taken aback. “What do you mean, hard on him? It’s hard on all of us.”

“But a man’s supposed to take care of his family. My dad couldn’t handle the pressure of all that responsibility. At least that’s what my mother said. He left us five years ago, after he got fired and couldn’t find another place to work. My mother didn’t even have a job back then, so I know what it’s like to have no money. Just try having no father, too!”

“But not having enough money isn’t just about him. The way he acts, it’s like he doesn’t realize it affects us kids as well.”

“He knows, trust me, he knows.”

As I walked home, I thought about Sarah’s words. We didn’t expect Dad to take care of everything all the time, did we? In the families I knew, it was expected that the man would work outside the home, but the woman did or did not, depending on the family’s viewpoint and circumstances. Was it possible that even today, with equal rights and all, a man who couldn’t support his family might consider himself a failure?

My parents had always told me it was important for a woman to have a college degree so she could work if she had to, but did it bother my father that Mom had to work almost full time now? I suddenly realized that all the time he was spending on the computer lately was probably trying to rebuild his business. He used to avoid the computer at night in order to spend time with us. I had to talk to Mom; she would tell me what was going on.

I found her in the kitchen before Dad came home from work. “Dad would never leave us, would he?”

She looked up, shocked. “Why would you say such a thing?”

I had been way too blunt, but I was getting tired of no one talking openly.

“Sarah said her dad left them because he couldn’t handle the pressure after losing his job. Dad must be under a lot of pressure

to improve his business.”

“Your father is a good man. He will get through this.”

“Does he have to make it so hard on us? He could thank us once in a while. He never notices how much Palani and I have been helping out around here. I don’t think he realizes that, with you working more hours, there’s a lot we have to take care of.”

Mom turned to face me. “Are you asking about appreciation? This family is going through rough times. I expect you to recognize what tasks need to be done and do them without wanting someone to say ‘Thank you, Sahana.’ Needing praise all the time shows weak-mindedness. Do you understand that? It’s a form of vanity. Would you ever ask someone to tell you you’re pretty?”

I couldn’t believe this—my mother didn’t understand at all. “So you’re saying it’s wrong to ever expect gratitude, even a simple thank you?”

“I want you to feel compassion for your father. That word, *compassion*, literally means ‘suffer with.’ Feel what he’s going through, feel his pain, then help him. You’re not a little girl anymore.”

“It seems like a small thing for him to say thanks once in a while,” I replied stubbornly. But I was starting to realize she had a point.

“Maybe so, but when you grow up more you will realize that’s an unrealistic expectation. And being angry about it detracts from everything else in your life. Think about what I do at work. Patients are angry about their illness and take it out on the nearest person, which is often me. If I allowed their negativity to bother me, I could become angry as well. And if I am rude back to them, they feel their ungrateful attitude is justified. But if I treat them with kindness, their outlook usually improves, and both our days are made better. Do you understand?”

“You can’t control the attitudes of other people, but you can still be positive yourself?”

“Exactly,” she said, seeming pleased that I wasn’t a lost cause after all. “You can only change yourself and remind yourself to be

appreciative. You can't make other people do that."

The next evening when Dad came home, Palani and Ganesh were reading together in the living room. I had been putting dishes away, but stopped and stood by so I could intervene if Dad got irritated with Palani. Getting new clients for an accounting firm is a slow process, so I expected him to be down.

I winced when he tripped over the boys' shoes in the doorway. He looked down at them, frowning.

"Palani," Dad said, approaching the back of the sofa.

By the way Palani jumped to attention, I could tell he had been absorbed in whatever he and Ganesh had been looking at. "Dad!"

"Oh, don't give Dad that shifty-eyed look," I thought—"it makes you look guilty." I suspected it was just because he expected to be told to do something. I didn't think he had actually done anything wrong, though with little brothers you can never be sure.

"I want you to pick up—" he said as he rounded the sofa. "Oh."

"Pick up what, Dad?"

"Were you *reading* to your brother?" he asked incredulously, seeing the book in Palani's hands.

I suppressed a chuckle, knowing it wouldn't help, though Palani caught my smirk. Usually he had to be almost bribed to read anything, especially to his brother, who was book obsessed. I understood why Dad was surprised, but I also knew Palani had started taking his big-brother role seriously after I explained to him how Mom and Dad needed our help.

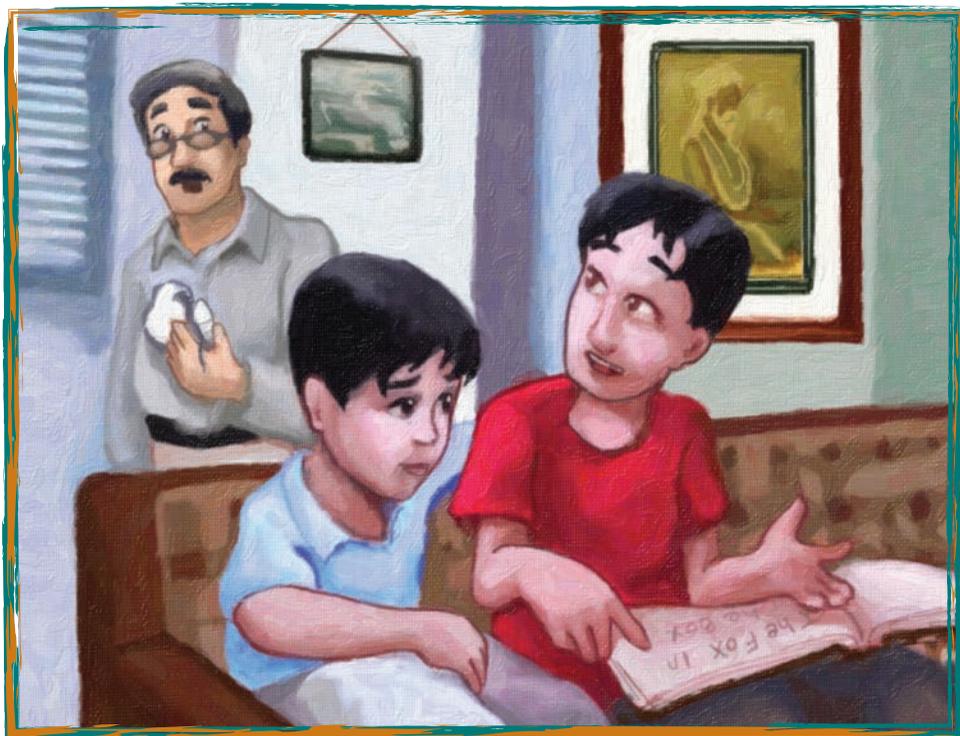
"Yes, but I'll stop if you want," he offered.

"No, no. That's okay. Keep reading to Ganesh."

"Really? Did you need me to do something?"

"No, I need you to just sit back down and continue with your story. I have to check my email."

Dad started walking away and then saw me, just standing there, staring. I pretended I was heading for the dining room. "I'll just clear the table for you." We had left our school stuff on the table, and that always bothered him.



“It’s fine. You can do it later,” he said. At my surprised expression, he continued, “Actually, you could just put the bags on the floor next to the table. Then your homework will be right there for you later.”

“Oh, okay.” That was nice of him. He usually insisted we keep all our books in our rooms. It made me want to respond kindly, as Mom and I had discussed. “How was your day?” I asked.

He turned back to me, startled. Had I never asked him that before? At first I didn’t think he was going to respond. Maybe I had overstepped some adult-child barrier.

He paused, then answered frankly, “Not as good as I would like. I spent half the day standing in line at the government building investigating income assistance programs, so I didn’t have much time to spend on my actual business.”

“That must have been difficult,” I said, recalling Sarah’s statement. I felt really strange, and not just because I had suddenly realized our father was a person, too. The strangest part was that I hadn’t realized that sooner.

“Boring, maybe, but not difficult,” he responded. “It was most difficult for the staff who work there. Day after day they have to face people who have lost their jobs or most of their income—people who are often angry and belligerent. These people come and wait indoors in a nice building in order to get financial aid that isn’t even available in many other countries, and yet security guards are needed to protect the staff from verbal and physical assault.”

“No appreciation there at all.”

“No, none,” he agreed, shaking his head. “And it made me realize how hard all this must be for you and your brothers. It’s not your fault, and there’s nothing you can do about it, but still you suffer.”

I suddenly noticed how tired Dad looked. He used to stand up so straight, and now he was practically leaning against the wall. “Can I bring you some tea?” I asked.

His eyes widened. “That would be most kind. Thank you, Sahana.”

“Oh, Dad, you don’t need to thank me! You’re the one with the challenge right now. I just want to help.”

A soft look came over his eyes. “I think I’m having what you kids would call an attitude adjustment. I’ve realized that when things got rough, I started focusing on negatives, and that’s been hard on the three of you. That is not the way I want to be.”

I offered, “Mom and I were talking about using prayer and meditation to keep our thoughts positive.”

“Excellent. I want us to have a harmonious home life. For Hindus, family harmony is of utmost importance. We need to start remembering that everyone has it hard sometimes and to be empathetic and appreciative of each other.”

“I for one am grateful to be in this family,” I said sincerely, giving him a hug.

Before I went to sleep that night, I meditated on how it was a challenging time for our family, but I was able to stop worrying

about what would happen, knowing we would persevere together, always grateful and appreciative of one another, always ready to help each other get through the day.

# Discussion Questions

*Sahana has to face dramatic changes in her life after her father's business nearly fails. She realizes she needs to grow up more and help make the family stronger, rather than just think about herself. This story illustrates how selfishness can block appreciation. Being grateful to the people in our lives is the desired result of working to overcome selfishness.*

1. What was Sahana's and Palani's first reaction to the news about Dad's business problems?
2. Can you recall a major challenge your family faced as a whole? How did you react? Would you respond the same way today?
3. How was Dad behaving at first when faced with his business problems? What incidents show his state of mind?
4. How did Sahana's mother react to her daughter's complaints? What did she mean by advising compassion? What does that mean to you?
5. Two examples are given in the story of people expressing anger in difficult situations. What are they? Why was it understandable? Are you aware of forms of suppressed anger? What are they?
6. Is showing appreciation something that comes naturally, or do we have to be taught this cultural refinement?
7. What changed in the way Sahana viewed her Dad toward the end of the story?
8. Why would being appreciated make someone a better employee, friend, employer, teacher, etc.?
9. Share how you were affected when someone appreciated you.
10. What strategies can you think of that would create more appreciation in your various relationships?



## Encountering God's Divine Power

**A**rjun, seventeen, squirmed uncomfortably in the seat, his muscles cramped and stiff. Air India's packed plane was obviously built for short Indians, not his 6' 2" Canadian-raised body. At least he had an exit row seat, two rows forward of his with his parents. When he removed his iPhone ear buds, the sound of a child crying assailed his ears, amplifying his ambivalence about this trip to Chennai. He didn't like leaving his friends in Toronto. And he didn't know what to expect in India, this being his first visit. He did look forward to seeing cousins he frequently Skyped, and Dad planned to take him to some famous South Indian temples. That was all good. But there were all the things he had heard about India—the crowded streets, the oppressive heat, the in-your-face poverty, the cows....

In Toronto, he attended temples regularly with his family, but he didn't think much of them. Several were set up in warehouse spaces; only a few were built from the ground up in traditional ways. One was next to a tire shop!

This journey was more a duty than a vacation. To Dad, it was a pilgrimage, and he had talked about it with Guruji, who recommended a visit to Palani Hills and Chidambaram. Dad hoped the journey would awaken some devotion in his son.

Arjun wondered why his parents were so archaic in their thinking. It seemed in all circumstances they would think of God and temples. If he was going for an exam, Mom would say, "Arjun, go to the puja room and pray before you leave." When his father bought him a bike, he had to do puja for it! What next? None of his Christian or Muslim friends did anything like this.

There was a constant push from Mom and Dad about going to the temple. He realized it was one of the few “Hindu” things they could do for him in Toronto, and he appreciated their wanting to pass on the religion. After all, he was a Hindu. Not that he was against going, but often the time conflicted with outings with friends or with school programs.

“On pilgrimage?” the elderly man next to him asked abruptly.

Startled out of his musing, Arjun replied, “Why yes, actually, we are.”

“I once went to Amarnath Cave, high in the mountains of Kashmir. It was difficult, cold and dangerous. But I tell you, darshan of the ice Sivalingam was the experience of my life. I can remember every minute of it even now, thirty years later. Nothing like a pilgrimage!”

“What is darshan? I’ve heard the term before.”

“It’s a wonderful concept! In the simplest sense it means seeing, you seeing the Deity. But it also means the Deity seeing you. That’s why we go to these temples, to see and be seen, but not by other devotees—by God Himself!”

The wizened man smiled and grew quiet. A few minutes later he was asleep again. As is the culture of India, this total stranger had treated Arjun as his own son, freely offering advice and explanations.

Arjun gazed at the elder, thankful for his meaningful story. He was always amazed at the ability of Indians to sleep on any form of transportation—a genetic trait he seemed to have missed out on.

Indeed, Arjun realized, “I am on pilgrimage.” A few months ago, out of the blue, Dad declared, “We’re going to India during your December break, away from Canada’s cold. December in Tamil Nadu will be pleasant, after the monsoon rains stop.”

“Dad, if it’s just for the weather, there are a hundred places in the US we could go.”

Dad laughed. “Humor your old man for a change. I need some

spiritual recharging; that's why we're going to Palani and Chidambaram. Plus, Guruji thinks it will do you a lot of good at this particular point in life."

Arjun understood this meant a lot to Dad, but he couldn't see how it would benefit him, even if Guruji had suggested it. But as his father had said, he would be leaving for college soon, and this could be the right time, perhaps the last chance, to go as a family.

Rough turbulence jolted him back to the present, and to the dismal airline food platter that had just arrived on his tray. "You would think an Indian airline could serve a better vegetarian meal," he thought. Still, mediocre food was better than none. He was not one to skip a meal.

After clearing customs and immigration in Chennai, they flew on to Madurai. The city's airport was small—no jetways. Thankfully, the tiny arrival lounge was air-conditioned. Dad bargained with a taxi driver for a decent fare to their hotel. As Arjun slid onto the cramped front seat, he thought, "This is where the airlines get their seat dimensions!" His knees hit the dashboard every time the driver applied the brakes, which was about once a minute, as cows, dogs or humans casually crossed in front of the car.

In contrast to Arjun's agony, Dad and Mom looked relaxed and happy, bouncing along in the back seat. For them, this was home, and they paid no mind to the chaos that disturbed Arjun. Daily life in Canada seemed so much smoother to him. Still, he took note that everyone on the street was a Hindu, and Hinduism pervaded the culture, from the Ganesha on the taxi driver's dashboard to the standing oil lamps in the hotel lobby. The hotel was clean and their room had a scenic view of the Madurai Temple towers. After a good night's sleep, wakened by the sound of temple bells, they started off at 6 am for Palani, 115 km away.

Arjun's complaints faded away. The drive was beyond picturesque; it was absolutely charming. At one stop he got out and walked over to a friendly cow. He had encountered cows

in Canada at a dairy farm his class visited. They were tame, but nothing like this cow, standing nonchalantly outside a shop, un tethered, totally at home and unafraid of people. She acted more like a pet than a herd animal. Feeling safe, Arjun petted her just as she snatched a small melon from a merchant. Her deed resulted in a lot of shouting, but, Dad explained, no one would strike a cow even for blatant theft, lest they themselves be thrashed by assembled passersby. "They take this holy cow business seriously, don't they?" Arjun quipped.

"Indeed they do," Dad chuckled.

The terrain grew hillier as they traveled north. The flat plain was dotted with huge rocky hills and solid granite outcroppings. Arjun observed the growing number of people, obviously pilgrims, walking alongside the road, many of them barefoot.

"Who are the men pilgrims in black?" Arjun asked his mother.

"Those are Ayyappan worshipers. They will eventually reach Sabarimala, a remote temple in Kerala, to worship the God Ayyappan, who is considered a brother of Murugan. As part of their vows, they will visit other temples along the way."

"Just as we are doing!"

"Yes, except that many are fasting; well, actually they are eating only one meal a day, after sunset, sleeping outdoors and spending their entire time in worship. Not only that, they are only walking, not driving."

Sleeping outside seemed easy enough, given the weather, but one meal a day? Arjun's stomach growled if he was twenty minutes late for dinner!

Just then Palani Hill came into sight, the temple perched on top. As they neared, he saw the long flight of steps snaking up the side. Around the bottom were other temples and village buildings. Arjun was wonder struck.

"This is a temple town," said Dad. "The primary industry here is the temple."

"According to the *Puranas*," his mother began, "Lord Siva and

Goddess Parvati once offered a magical mango to whichever of Their sons, Ganesha or Murugan, could go around the world first. Murugan jumped on His peacock and took off immediately, convinced He could easily beat His portly brother. But when He arrived back at Mount Kailash, Ganesha was already peeling the mango. Rather than race after his brother, Ganesha had given the matter some thought, walked around His divine parents and announced, 'As the entire universe is contained within You, I have now circled the Earth.' They had to agree with his mystical logic and gave Him the mango. Murugan was fuming, outraged. 'But you are the fruit of wisdom and knowledge,' His Mother consoled him—'you are the fruit,' in Tamil, is *Palani*. That did little to pacify Murugan. He renounced His possessions and flew off to this place, which came to be known as Palani Hill. Murugan is enshrined here as a renunciate monk, named Palaniandavar, wearing only a loincloth and holding a walking stick."

Arjun had heard the story before, but this time it went deeper, as though he were seeing it happen, with Murugan on His peacock alighting on the hill now rising before him.

His father interrupted his reverie. "Let's get checked into the hotel so we can make it to the top for the 8pm puja. If we hurry, we may be able to see the chariot procession at 7:00."

They would easily get there on time by taking the cable tram, but that was rather against the spirit of pilgrimage. Here, climbing the 683 steps to the top was as much part of the worship as the arati. The tram was necessary for the aged and infirm, but Arjun was neither; he was athletic and looked forward to the climb. He would have liked to run up the steps, but instead helped Mom make her way more slowly.

Just as they reached the final step, they looked to the right and there was the chariot leaving its shed with the parade Deity inside. "Auspicious timing," remarked Dad. Arjun had seen what passed for a chariot back in Toronto at the bigger temples, but this was something else. Brilliant polished gold, exquisitely carved and



decorated, a vehicle belonging not to this Earth but to the Siv-loka, the heaven world. He was invited to help pull the chariot around the temple, a task that almost put him in a trance. Fortunately, it was not a festival day, when 100,000 people might be crowding the temple; tonight there were just a few thousand. Thus, there was no great push to move on when the family finally came before the main Deity inside the temple. Arjun wanted to linger and take in the sight of Murugan dressed as an ascetic—the theme for that particular puja. “Perhaps,” he thought, “I might renounce the world one day, if even a God would do so.”

After the arati, they proceeded to the shrine of Bhogar Rishi, who lived thousands of years ago and is said to still sit in samadhi deep in a cave within the hill. Arjun didn’t know what to make of that story, but the spiritual vibration inside the dark chamber was so powerful he sat motionless there for an hour.

“Arjun,” Father whispered, “they’re closing the temple; we have to go back down.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize what time it was. This place is so powerful

and interesting and amazing all at once. I've never experienced anything like it before."

"That's the shakti, the divine power. If you think this is strong, wait until we get to Chidambaram."

Arjun looked at his father seriously, then glanced back toward the sanctum. "I can't imagine anything stronger than this, Dad. I might disappear there."

"I hope you don't, but you wouldn't be the first. Saint Manikavasagar is said to have disappeared into the Siva Nataraja Deity in Chidambaram in the ninth century."

"OK, I promise not to disappear, at least not on this trip!"

The next morning, Arjun insisted the family return up the hill for the morning worship. Exiting the main sanctum area, they turned to see the rising sun glistening on the gold tower. Arjun blushed when Mom exclaimed, "Our temple-shy Canadian teenager is turning into quite the ardent Hindu, isn't he?"

Returning to Madurai, they paid a brief visit to the Meenakshi Temple, then headed toward the coast, visiting other temples along the way. Arjun was anxious to visit the huge Brihadeeswarar Siva temple at Thanjavur, built in the eleventh century by Rajaraja Chola I. He found it quite different from Palani Hills.

"It's maintained by the government now and, no, it doesn't have the same power as Palani," Dad confirmed. "There is possibly a deeper reason, also, that Guruji once explained to me. Temples are either started by the Gods or started by men. Those with divine origins are far superior. Palani Temple was established by Lord Murugan Himself. This temple was built more as a monument to the king's successes. True, he was expressing deep gratitude to Siva, but his motives might have included a bit of ego. This is, after all, one of the largest temples of its kind ever built. The capstone you see way up there weighs in at eighty-six tons. They say it was hauled to its resting place 216 feet above the ground by elephants on a sand ramp starting five miles away."

“Really? Not!”

“Scoff if you like, but a few years ago some archeologists tried out a sand ramp with some elephants and demonstrated it is possible to move such huge stones that way.”

Arjun enjoyed the temple and its immense, fifteen-foot-tall Sivalingam, but felt little of the shakti power he had experienced at Palani Hills. “This really is mostly a museum,” he thought, “complete with foreign tourists who came to see the architecture, not to worship.”

The drive from Thanvajur to Chidambaram was pleasant enough, bumpy roads alternating with modern highways. They arrived in late afternoon at what Dad called the best hotel in town. It was a modest affair, with a tiny elevator that could hold three people and a suitcase. Arjun took the stairs.

After a quick shower, the family headed for the temple, just a short walk down the narrow lane that the locals called a street. The entry road was crowded with flower vendors and other shops, all catering to the devotees. They walked through the grand rajagopuram, admiring the carvings of the 108 dance poses of Nataraja on each side, past the thousand-pillared hall, past the decorated temple elephant, who stood all day blessing pilgrims, and into the main structure. Suddenly the temple’s six-foot-tall bells rang; Arjun felt the sound reverberate in his bones. He didn’t know a bell could do that.

The ancient stone courtyard was small, the sanctum a free-standing building of polished granite pillars and a roof of 21,600 solid gold tiles—one for each breath a person takes during a day, the priest told him. Moments later, they were led up the small steps to the left of the sanctum and brought right in front of the Siva Nataraja Deity. Arjun was overwhelmed by the same shakti he had encountered at Palani meditating at Bhogar Rishi’s cave shrine. He closed his eyes and went within himself, feeling entirely at peace, immersed in the presence of God. The priest bade him look through a stone lattice into a small chamber next

to the Deity. "Can you see it?" the priest asked.

Arjun looked but saw nothing.

"What do you see?" the priest prodded.

"Nothing, I don't see a thing. It's empty," Arjun reported with a bit of embarrassment that he was missing something important.

"That's it. Exactly, the priest smiled. This is where Siva is worshiped as *akasha*, the invisible foundation of reality inside everything we see."

Arjun took a moment to realize what was being said and why people would peer into an empty chamber bordered by a garland of fifty-one gold bilva leaves. He realized this was a deep thought and, in fact, it continued to entertain his philosophical mind for the next few hours.

Arousing Arjun from his meditation, Father said, "Tomorrow we'll attend the ruby Nataraja puja. That's something you will never forget."

Soon they were back at the hotel enjoying a vegetarian dinner that seemed to have every favorite thing he had ever eaten, and a few new ones. He had newfound appreciation for the humble hostel.

The next morning they arrived early and sat quietly in an open courtyard with dozens of devotees, all waiting for the puja. A flurry of activity in the raised central sanctum alerted them that something was about to happen. The priests took their place near the edge of the platform and the devotees assembled in the courtyard about five feet below. Arjun found a spot near the front, but off to the side so he didn't block anyone's view, conscious of the fact he was a full foot taller than many of those around him.

He felt a cool rush of wind and energy as the six-inch-tall ruby Nataraja was taken from its silver box. For the third time, he felt the shakti power envelop him, erasing every concern in his mind, every doubt about the past, every worry about the future. He was totally in the present.

Then a worshipful hand gesture, a mudra, done by the priest

struck him in the way a distinctive odor touches off a memory of a distant event. It was as if he were experiencing this same puja, but in a different body. But how could that be? This was his first time here. It had to be from a past that was older than this lifetime, in a previous birth, perhaps hundreds of years ago. The experience lingered, his perception alternating between being a young man in the 21st century and an older person of another time. The sensation ended as the priest passed the arati lamp first in front and then behind the semi-transparent ruby Nataraja. As the huge bells rang again, Arjun felt the boundaries of his mind expand. It was hard for him to grasp what was happening, it was so new to him. As his mind struggled for understanding, the thought came, "I am somehow aware of the entire universe."

His father's gentle voice broke the spell, "Arjun, we have to go now."

Opening his eyes, the boy whispered, "I feel so at peace here. Let's stay a little longer," his eyes filling with tears.

"Then let's sit over here and meditate for a while. But we do have to be on the road to Chennai. Our flight from there leaves just after midnight."

Slowly Arjun returned to normal consciousness, but as soon as he thought of the puja, or the Bhogar Rishi shrine, he again felt the intense shakti force. He relished this blissful state while hurtling at 100 km per hour along the wide coast highway to Mahabalipuram and Chennai, oblivious to the slow-moving lorries, the speeding, honking cars, the occasional goat wandering on the shoulder—oblivious to the world around him. He had touched into another world and was not eager to let it go.

Back in Toronto the next Saturday, Dad didn't have to ask if he wanted to go to the temple; he had already said he would go. It was the one next to the tire shop—not his favorite temple. But as soon as he walked in and saw Nataraja, something clicked inside him. The same shakti he felt in India returned full force.

"Now I see why you come," he told his father. "Once that door

is open to the Divine, any temple serves as the entrance.”

Outside, Arjun encountered Donny, the shop owner.

“How do you like living next to a Hindu temple?” Arjun inquired.

“Didn’t know what to think of it at first, I have to tell you,” replied the man in a thick Newfoundland accent. “What do you do in there, anyway? When that bell starts ringing so loudly, I can feel something come right through the walls, something spiritual. I don’t know what to call it, but I never felt that at church, and I consider myself a good Christian.”

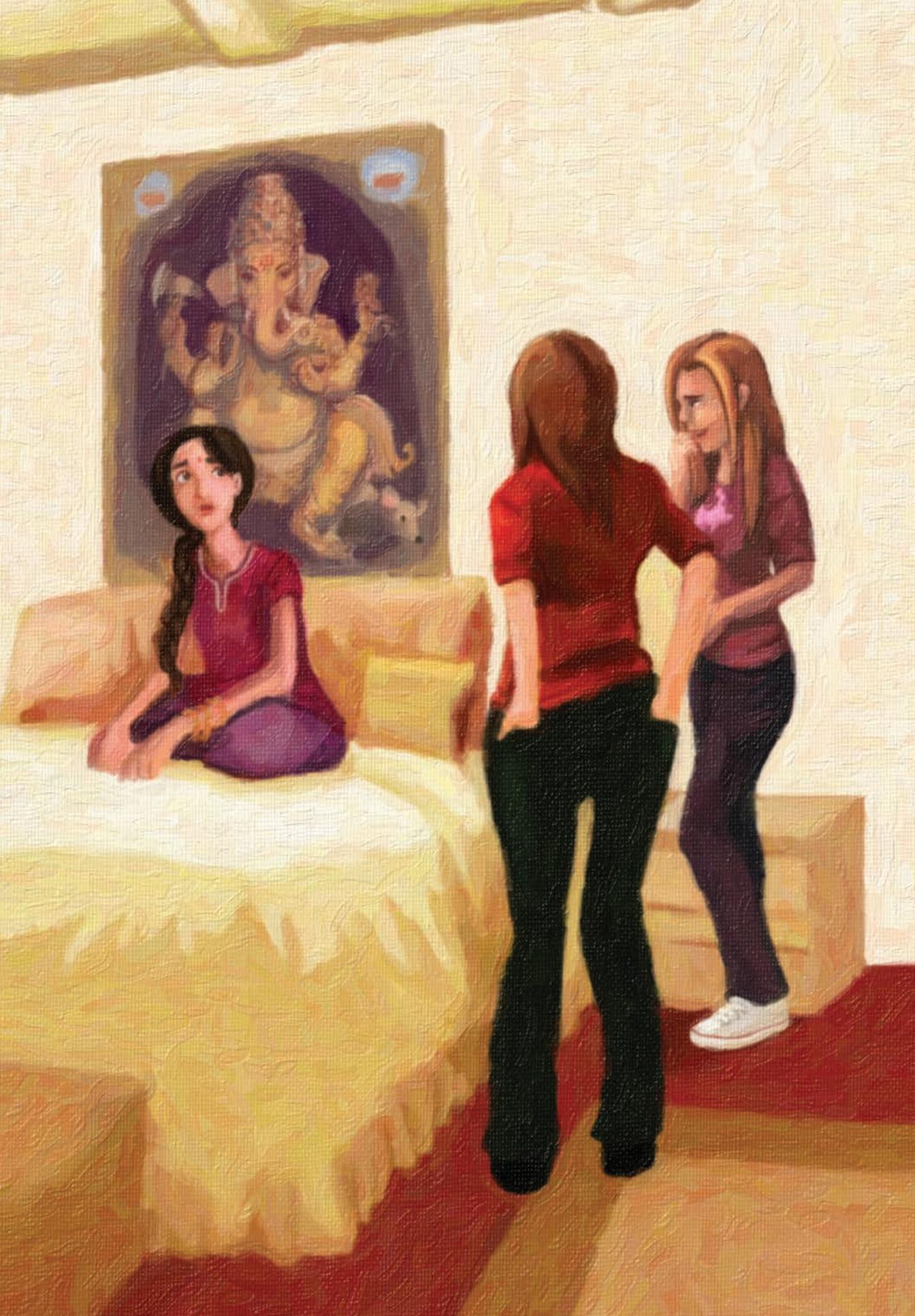
Arjun smiled, “Shakti, the power of God, that’s what we call it.”

# Discussion Questions

*In this story we learn about Arjun's trip to India as a teen and how it changed his religious life. At the Palani Temple and later the Chidambaram Siva Nataraja Temple, he has unforgettable experiences that return again each time he enters a temple back home in Canada. The Hindu religion is not based on blind faith in a body of beliefs. It is an experiential religion, with each Hindu personalizing their path based on what they themselves can actually feel and experience.*

1. Do you, like Arjun, wonder why your parents find religious observances at home and in the temple so important? Why do you think they want to share this with you?
2. How did Arjun react to seeing and learning about the Ayappan pilgrims? Do you know anyone who has undergone such austerities—difficult disciplines such as eating only once a day? Do you think you could do it?
3. What is darshan? What would it be like to see God, or have God see you?
4. Have you ever felt “someone” looking back out at you from the Deity in the temple, or any kind of spiritual force coming from religious worship? How would you explain this?
5. Many people don't feel the subtle energy of darshan. Why do you think this is?
6. Have you ever pulled the chariot at a temple festival? How did it make you feel?
7. Why was Arjun unimpressed with the Brihadeeswarar Temple? In your experience, what are the varying feelings people have about temples?
8. What did Arjun experience during the puja to the ruby Nataraja? What impression do you think it made on him?
9. What is the shakti of the temple? Have you experienced this yourself?
10. Have you ever encountered non-Hindus, such as Donny in the story, who felt the spiritual power of a Hindu temple? How did they describe their experience?





## My Month of Doubt

**G**anesha has been in my thoughts ever since I can remember, when my parents took me to the temple as a baby. My first religious experiences were the sounds, sights and smells of that holy place. Watching the elephant-headed God, praying to Him, singing songs to please Him—through the years I took these important parts of my life for granted.

For a while last year, my friend Jennifer changed that. I was fifteen and in ninth grade. Everyone says friends can have a strong effect on you at that age, and I suppose they are right. My closest friend, Erin, had come to my house often, and I to hers. She had never made an issue of the big picture of Ganesha in my bedroom; she just said, “What a beautiful picture, Parvati! Why does he have an elephant head?”

One Saturday when Erin was over, Jennifer and her friend Samantha came by for some games and TV. When we got to my bedroom, Jennifer took one look at Ganesha and let loose with, “What is that strange-looking creature! Some kind of Hindu beast?” She and Samantha burst out laughing.

Trying to explain only made it worse. I spoke in my softest tone in a way I hoped she might understand, “Ganesha is the God we always pray to first, because He can remove obstacles to what we want to achieve. For example, He can free up time for studying, so we can get good grades at school.”

“Sounds about as believable as writing to Santa Claus to get something for Christmas! At least with Santa Claus your parents will probably read the letter and might actually get you what you want, but this elephant’s nothing but a painting, something people think up for children.”

Erin nudged me to move out of the bedroom. The four of us

went downstairs to watch TV, but you could have cut the tension with a knife. If my Dad had been there, he would have asked the two of them to leave. After they finally did go, Erin reminded me it was just one person's opinion, and you should always consider the source of any opinion. I loved her for trying, but she wasn't Hindu. She understood in some sort of polite universalist way, but she didn't really understand. Ganesha was just as real to me as Mom or Dad. I was glad I hadn't shown them the shrine room. I can't imagine how mean Jennifer might have been in there!

Erin told me Jennifer's parents were atheists who took pride in demeaning religious people and actually coached their daughter on how to do it. They hated religion and taught her to feel the same way—and, I just learned, to act on those feelings. She was just as quick to insult her Christian friends. That night, Dad explained to me that not all atheists are like that—the word just means someone who doesn't believe in God, not someone who is consciously critical of those who do.

The next day at school, Jennifer spread the word that I was some sort of devil worshiper, which was apparently worse than being a hardened criminal. Some of the kids stared at me when I walked by. I heard mocking snorts and some really bad fake elephant roars, but none of them had the courage to look me in the eye. Fortunately, I had Erin and a bunch of other friends who knew me. Plus, most of the Christian kids in the school took my side—partly because they believed I should be able to practice any religion I chose, but mostly because they had been on the receiving end of Jennifer's attacks themselves. It was one thing for Jennifer to ridicule dozens of well-connected Christians, quite another for her to go after the school's lone Hindu, so they sided with me. I was happy to have their support.

It was an incredibly difficult time for me. Besides the snide snickers from kids I once counted as friends, the whole episode planted seeds of doubt. What if Jennifer was right in some way, even if she was rude? I had seen rude people be right before, and

really polite people be dead wrong. Perhaps it was more likely rude people were wrong, but the rude kids who spoke before being acknowledged by teachers often did have the right answers. Things became uncomfortably fuzzy. Ganesha was really fuzzy. Was He real—or was He just some vague concept, something I believed in only because my parents taught me to?

That night I stared at my Ganesha picture and decided to take it down. I rolled it up and put it in the closet. For the next few weeks of my life that's all He was—a stored-away picture. It reminded me of Mom and Dad's photo albums of ancestors I had never met—old pictures that had no meaning to me. Mom and Dad could look at them and tell stories of how they traveled to Pillaiyarpatti Temple when they were young. Meaningful stories—for them. I wondered if I would ever want to go to Pillaiyarpatti, or even to our local temple again. If Ganesha was just a meaningless myth, as Jennifer asserted, then what was all this fuss about? Why not just get on with life? A part of me deep inside knew that wasn't true, but heavy doubt clouded that knowledge. The kids around me in America all seemed to be doing just fine without Ganesha.

About two weeks later, on a Saturday, Mom told me we were going to temple the next day. It was a long drive, so we only went every other weekend. For the first time in my life, I declined, "I think I'll stay back this time."

Mom's expression reminded me of the day her brother called from Hyderabad saying they had just lost Indira Auntie—sad, shocked and confused. She didn't know what to say.

The next morning she and Dad drove off without me. I was glad they hadn't pressured me, and we hadn't argued about it. All Dad said was, "Yes, Parvati, maybe you just need a break from temple. It's okay." I loved and respected that about them. They allowed me to figure out some stuff on my own.

The minute they were out the door, I felt lonely, like a solitary Himalayan sadhu in a big, silent house. If nothing else, I could

usually hear Mom making some sort of noise in the background: singing to herself in the kitchen, doing laundry or relaxing in front of the TV. I had heard the saying that a home is where the mother is, and it hit me how true that saying is. After an hour or so of total boredom, I vowed I would go to temple next time—if not for Ganesha, at least for the people, at least for my parents.

My homework all complete, I went to the shrine room to ponder His existence. Not just His, but Siva's and the other Gods as well. It didn't help much. Doubt was like a snowball on a hill. Once started, it had a building momentum of its own. My time of reflection was brief.

Back upstairs, I decided to take another look at Ganesha's rolled-up picture. But before I could get to it, I noticed something else: the fat-pig lucky charm my friend Xian had given me in sixth grade. Memories came rushing back.

I was glad I had met Xian, a boy from China. He had been an interesting friend, that year and the next. Besides, his situation helped me realize how cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings that can lead to hard feelings—and difficult times, especially for the one being misunderstood. I could see parallels between Xian's situation then and mine now.

Nobody, including our teacher, Mrs. Davis, could pronounce Xian's name. I only knew it as Xian because it was written on our class list that way. On the first day he tried several times to get us to say it correctly. But not even Mrs. Davis could do so, and she was incredibly patient and tried the hardest. The nearest I ever came was 'Zhwon.' Still Xian only smiled and said, "Close, Parvati." The fact that he had learned to pronounce my name easily only made matters worse. By the end of the first week he became "Shawn," a name we could all say. He looked sad and relieved at the same time about this logical but unfortunate solution to a clash of cultures.

Mrs. Davis said we were lucky to have Xian in our class because he could add a lot to our understanding. I felt sorry he

was getting picked on. He was shy and already under a lot of pressure just getting used to America. When someone called him an FOB, I had to ask Mom and Dad what it meant. “Fresh Off the Boat,” Dad translated. He laughed when I asked, “So, you and Mom were once FOBs too?”

“Yes, Parvati, at one time we were. But it’s not a compliment, and we shouldn’t use it.”

The biggest cultural clash hit Xian a lot harder when we studied China later in the year. On the subject of food, the textbook said the Chinese eat dogs. At that, several kids made loud, disgusted noises; others just looked shocked or outraged. Xian winced.

Dog sounded disgusting to me, too—but so does cow, pig, chicken, fish and eggs. I have been vegetarian from birth, and the thought of eating any animal is not appealing in any way. It seemed hypocritical that these kids, who ate many kinds of meat, were so outraged about another culture’s fondness for dog meat. Of course, many had pet dogs, and eating your pet does sound worse than eating something from a tidy package bought at a store—something you don’t even associate with ever being alive. Some argued that dogs are smart, but pigs are smarter than dogs, and Americans have no problem at all with eating pork and bacon. Some people even eat dolphins, who may be even smarter than humans!

It got even tougher for Xian when the class bully confronted him and asked whether he had ever eaten a dog. Unfortunately, Xian wasn’t used to the body language and other subtle posturing of bullying, so he proudly answered, “Yes, and snake, too.”

Within the week most of the kids in school taunted him as some sort of snake-eating, dog-chewing monster from China. The meaner kids asked if he preferred poodles to dalmatians, rattlesnakes to boas. If it wasn’t for Mrs. Davis and the school counselor, and kids like David, Erin and me, I think he might have changed schools. Some days he looked like he wished he could get

back on a plane and go home to China. But he persisted, as did I and many others who befriended him. Eventually the fuss died down and he became popular. But he never talked much about his ancestral home.

At the end of the school year, Xian gave me this lucky pig ornament. Today it seemed like Ganesha was speaking through it: "It's not that Jennifer or kids like her are intentionally mean. It's more that a foreign culture frightens them, because they are insecure in their own ways."

Remembering what Xian had gone through helped a ton. His situation was far worse than mine, but he had the courage to soldier on. Still, having it happen personally is harsh. Thank goodness most Americans had grown beyond the more brutal and overt racism of earlier days.

When I heard our car enter the garage, my mood shifted. I hoped they had brought some temple food, and they had. That always cheers me up!

Two weeks later, Mom again announced a trip to the temple. I went with them this time. I had friends who would be there, and they were fun to be with. Besides, temple food is even better fresh.

When we entered, I wasn't sure if I wanted to walk with Mom on her pradakshina rounds, but she gave me her "Come along now" look I was so used to. It wasn't like a bossy demand, just one of gentle encouragement. But I could sense her doubt, too. My doubt was about Ganesha, but hers was about me.

Ours is a Siva temple primarily, but there are side sanctums for Ganesha and a few other Gods. The small Ganesha shrine is my favorite spot to sit. My parents and I had once discussed favorite spots. It seemed everybody had one in the temple, not just us.

As we came around the corner to peek at Ganesha, the first part I saw was His left eye—and it seemed like He was looking right at me. Then as we walked further, I noticed a white woman dressed in a beautiful sari just like all the Indian ladies. She was

blonde, like my “friend” Jennifer, who had insulted Ganesha. Her husband and small child were there, too. He prostrated full out before Ganesha, just like Dad did. The contrast between these people’s joy in worship and Jennifer’s negativity was striking. I already knew not all Westerners were like Jennifer, but I wondered what had brought these people to Hinduism. When we got near the Siva sanctum, I saw tears in the man’s eyes. “Wow!” I thought.

After once around the temple, we each went to our private spot to wait for the main puja. Then we followed the priest for arati at each of the sanctums until the puja to Lord Siva was conducted. After taking the final flame, I headed downstairs for food.

I took my plate to sit with my friends, wondering if any of them ever had doubts like I was having. Not knowing quite how to begin, I started with the topic of favorite places upstairs. “Thamby,” I asked, “have you ever noticed how everyone seems to have their favorite place to sit in the temple?”

“Yes. I notice that sometimes, especially with certain people. You would think they owned certain pillars, no?”

“What’s your favorite spot?”

“It’s not a place I sit, it’s a place I walk. I get a nice positive feeling there.”

“Where is that?” I asked.

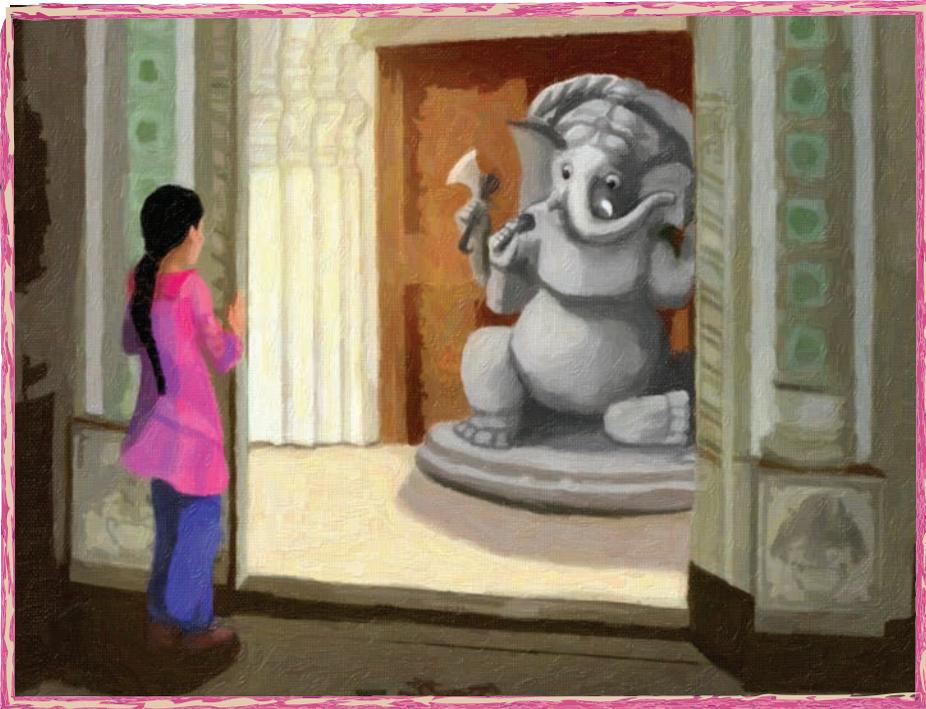
“Well, it’s kind of personal... But yeah, it’s just when you walk around the small Ganesha sanctum and peek in. It seems like Ganesha is looking at me right then.”

My curiosity piqued now, I asked, “Which eye?”

“It’s always the left eye. I don’t know why, but I get this feeling. I look at His right eye sometimes just to double check, but I don’t get the same feeling. Weird, isn’t it?”

I had to smile. “It doesn’t sound weird to me!”

When other friends joined the conversation, it turned out Thamby and I weren’t the only ones who felt certain parts of the temple were extra special. Some of the kids even had the same



feeling about Ganesha's left eye.

The next week at the temple, I made a point of attending the Ganesha puja, partly to check out that eye thing again. This time, something really strange happened. The priest was chanting the 108 names of Ganesha, and Ganesha was chanting right along with the priest. I could see His mouth moving! I looked away and Ganesha stopped. Then I looked back and He started again. Finally, my mind accepted what I was seeing—and right then Ganesha winked at me! Gods with a sense of humor? Who would have thought?

I went home in a daze not saying a word about all this to my parents. I thought they might think I was nuts, even though Dad had once told me about a vision of Murugan that changed his life. Plus, our Guruji said that when something spiritual happens to you it's best to keep it to yourself; otherwise you may lose the divine energy of the experience. He said not everyone will have a dramatic vision, but Hinduism is a religion of experience, not blind faith. If we watch closely, we can catch even the little things

the Gods do that let us know they are watching over us.

That night I dreamed I was back in the temple, walking up to the Ganesha shrine. I could even smell the incense. When I got close, Ganesha looked straight at me, both eyes wide open, and demanded, "What am I doing in that closet?"

Startled, I woke up, the image and words crystal clear in my mind.

"Got the message," I said to myself. I stood up, took His picture out of the closet and put it back up on the wall, all in the middle of the night.

The next morning I asked Mom for one of her Ganesha statues. I put it right in the center of my dresser counter. Behind it I placed Xian's gift. Its significance would remain secret, just like the visions. I had all the proof I needed that He really was there. Never again could anyone make me doubt Lord Ganesha's existence.

I know there will always be people who question my beliefs, and some things I will have to keep to myself. But now I am firm in what I believe. I'll ask Ganesha to guide me in my daily situations and to help me remember who I truly am.

The next time I'm with Jennifer her comments will be "in one ear and out the other." Sure, I may react in the moment, but there's no way it'll take me a whole month to figure it out.

# Discussion Questions

*Parvati's friends criticize her belief in Lord Ganesha, causing her to doubt Him herself. After a turbulent month, her faith in Ganesha is finally restored. This story shows how one's belief in Ganesha must be strong enough to withstand mocking by non-believers and how faith is strengthened by spiritual experience.*

1. Why did Jennifer mock Parvati's picture of Ganesha? What is an atheist? Why would an atheist insult someone's religious beliefs?
2. How did Parvati react to Jennifer's attack? How do you think you would have reacted? What are some other ways Parvati could have responded at the time?
3. What happened at school the next day? Who took whose side and for what reasons? How did Parvati handle this? How might you have handled it?
4. What was her experience with Xian, and how did that relate to her current situation?
5. Why did Parvati go to the temple with her parents the next time they went? How did her friends there help her? Why was she so impressed with the blonde lady at the temple?
6. What was Parvati's experience of Ganesha at the temple? Have you ever had such an experience? How is it possible?
7. In the story, Parvati was influenced for good or bad by different friends—Erin, Jennifer, the kids at the temple. Discuss how friends impact how we feel about ourselves, and why choice of friends is important.
8. Why do many Hindus keep a small murti or picture of Ganesha in their car?
9. How do you view your relationship with Ganesha? Friend? Father? Mother? Older brother? Divine protector? A combination of all of these?
10. Do you also have relationships with other Gods? Compared to your relationship with Ganesha, how are those similar or different?





## My Son, Drummer Divine

**M***ridangam prodigy Ravi Padmanabhan was recently in town and performed with a singer and a tambura player before three standing-room-only crowds at the Wellesley Theatre. After hearing a brilliant performance, our (fictional) London reporter sat down with Nageswaram Padmanabhan, the artist's father, to hear the story of his son's long, hard road to acclaim.*

**Reporter:** How old was Ravi when you first noticed his talent?

**Nageswaram:** He was a baby. Whenever his mother sang bhajans or we had music in the background, he seemed to have a sense of rhythm about him expressed in his body movements. At an early age, we would see him finger drumming on things, making up his own beats. At the time it was more of a curiosity; it wasn't like we told ourselves, "Our son's going to be a famous drummer!" But we bought him a little statue of Ganesha playing the mridangam, and he kept it beside his bed. Then I remember one day—I think he was three—we were at a temple festival listening to an excellent thavil player. My older children were disturbed by the volume and the piercing sound of the nadaswaram. But Ravi wasn't. He started to dance with the music, while keenly watching the drummer's hands. The thavil player noticed him and motioned him over during a break. He taught Ravi a few simple rhythms and then did an improvised duet with him for a minute. "The child has talent," the drummer told me. After that, we took him to concerts whenever the opportunity arose.

**Reporter:** Is what he is today the result of natural talent alone?

**Nageswaram:** (laughs) Oh no. Not at all. He had lots of talent, but no focus. He would drum with his fingers for five minutes here and there, or do voiced carnatic rhythms in the car, then run off to play with his friends. His energy was all over the place. His teachers at school commonly wrote, “Ravi is a capable student but lacks focus. He needs to direct his energies.”

**Reporter:** Obviously all that has changed now. Watching him perform, I see he has incredible focus. He seems totally alone in a world of his own where only music exists. What brought about the change?

**Nageswaram:** You might think we bought him a drum, but actually we didn't. I figured he would wreck it. He had so much wild energy! His mother and I first did some research within spiritual literature and psychology to help us figure out how to help him.

**Reporter:** So you conditioned him, trained him?

**Nageswaram:** (laughs) Yes, we trained him. Better put, we helped him train himself. Not in music at first—in life skills. We learned and taught him about willpower—the more you use it, the more you have to use. Other skills as well. All the books say to start slow, work your way up. Then there was the key idea of interest, or passion—that anything in life is easier if you have a natural interest in it. Athletes love sports, musicians love music, scientists love science. Another life skill we focused on was cleanliness.

**Reporter:** How did that relate to the music?

**Nageswaram:** We used one to help with the other. When he was little, he had difficulty with taking baths, brushing his teeth, cleaning up after himself—too busy to remember, or better things to do. So we made a game of it. We had him brush his teeth to his own beats and rhythms. He had incredibly clean teeth for awhile.

We gave him a goal of continuous brushing for one whole minute, then two. Before that he would make two swipes, and say he was done. Being urged to create music while brushing helped him be more thorough and consciously conscious.

**Reporter:** Then what?

**Nageswaram:** That convinced him he could stay on task for two minutes straight, which back then was a long time. Then we shifted to cleaning his room, then to helping his mother by cutting vegetables. The emphasis was not only on doing the task, but completing it and doing it well. He learned that unfinished tasks can build up, and a long list of things still undone makes anyone feel burdened and ill at ease. The cycle of unfinished tasks and procrastination becomes a habit. To avoid that pitfall and remain in the now, Ravi learned the value of finishing each thing he starts, and doing it to the best of his ability.

**Reporter:** Sounds too easy. Surely there must have been failures.

**Nageswaram:** Lots of them. But we persisted. Starting with small increments of time was an important tactic. One of his tasks was to water the garden regularly. To provide sufficient water to all the plants takes about half an hour. At first he came in after a few minutes claiming it was all done. Going out to check, I found that several patches were still parched. He admitted to skipping them, complaining how boring it was. So we divided the landscape into three parts, watering each section for ten minutes at different times. That was far more manageable.

**Reporter:** How was he at school over the years?

**Nageswaram:** Quite similar. His school success progressed gradually. We had to allow for short shifts in homework. He was unable to sit for an hour straight. But ten minutes on, ten minutes off, for two hours amounted to the same thing. It was actually even more productive, because knowing he would get a break in

ten minutes, he focused more intensely on the work. His productivity went up. This phenomenon is well researched and documented now. Few young people are capable of concentrating for long stretches. Business owners are realizing the old Henry Ford assembly-line model actually decreases productivity over a period of time. The workers just get bored and slow down.

**Reporter:** Was there ever a key turning point, an “aha” moment?

**Nageswaram:** At age twelve he went to his mother and announced, “Mom, I want to be a professional drummer!” It was a surprise to us; we hadn’t yet started him on lessons. Our first response was, “But, Ravi, you would have to work so hard.” I wasn’t sure he could manage it. I had read biographies of Indian musicians and knew a few personally. They assured me image of the “starving artist” trying to make it professionally was no joke. I knew how much practice time they put in. I told him it was a difficult life, and that success was more uncertain than in other careers. But he was not dissuaded.

**Reporter:** What did you do then?

**Nageswaram:** We took him for an interview with his first teacher, Mr. Shankaran, here in London, to see if Ravi had the qualities needed to receive instruction. In Indian culture, you can’t just pay a lot of money and hire a teacher regardless of your potential. The traditional way is to prove your worth and be accepted by the teacher.

**Reporter:** That sounds like an interesting encounter.

**Nageswaram:** It was. I thought it would be all about music. We admitted to the maestro that Ravi had not taken lessons, but seemed to have innate talent. Shankaran clapped out a few rhythms and asked Ravi to repeat them. Some were fairly complex. We were surprised how closely Ravi was able to replicate them. As the exercises proceeded, we noticed for the first time

the fluid looseness of his movements, a quality we enjoyed in good drummers. Shankaran asked Ravi about willpower, not just how to use it, but what it is. Our son answered, "It's unlike other forms of energy, which diminish as they are used. The more willpower you use, the more you have to draw from." The teacher was testing whether Ravi had the mental strength to make it.

**Reporter:** I take it he was accepted for training?

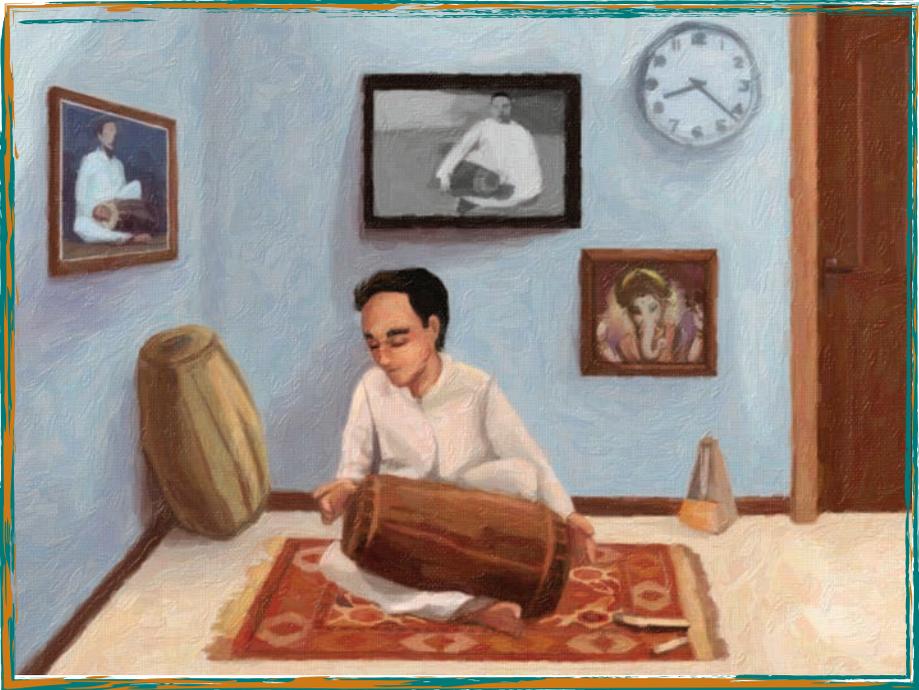
**Nageswaram:** Only conditionally at first. When the teacher was asking about finishing tasks, Ravi looked at his mother and me, begging us not to elaborate. I was thinking at the time, "My, you've got the wrong man. This chap can't finish anything!" But I stayed silent, and because Ravi was so eager to try, Shankaran took him on. I figured Ravi would last a month or so, but happily he proved me wrong.

**Reporter:** How was that first month?

**Nageswaram:** We knew that we had to help him gain more self-discipline if we were to make this venture a success. We redoubled our efforts to have Ravi finish what he started. Motivated by the opportunity to learn drumming, which he clearly loved, he was eager to cooperate. If we asked him to clean his room, he would do it completely. He wouldn't start the next task unless this was done. This discipline helped him to keep his awareness concentrated.

**Reporter:** Tell me about the music.

**Nageswaram:** The mridangam practice was done right on schedule, the same amount of time each day. The same principles applied in practice: take up one task, or rhythm, and practice it to perfection, then the next. No skipping on, or back, to easier parts. It wasn't a matter of just putting in the time, we told Ravi again and again, you must apply your willpower. Reading more about the subject, I learned that if a short-term goal isn't sufficiently



motivating, you need to become engaged in a bigger picture. When Ravi found the practice monotonous, I reminded him of his love of music and his goal of becoming a world-class drummer.

**Reporter:** This couldn't have been easy for a twelve-year-old.

**Nageswaram:** Sure, there were days when he struggled. That's normal. The regimen was to practice five days of seven each week. He learned to organize and execute the various tasks of his life and school, and he learned how to time-manage his practice sessions. Once he got into that rhythm, so to speak, his progress was surprisingly rapid.

**Reporter:** Did he get holidays, total breaks from it?

**Nageswaram:** Yes. Those helped, too. We went on vacation to India, leaving the mridangam at home. I think it came along in his head though. The flight attendants on the Air India flight noticed his fingers working away. One even came and asked him to play, like air mridangam. We all had a good laugh. It broke the boredom of the plane ride.

**Reporter:** Was there ever a point when he wanted to give up?

**Nageswaram:** Never. At least not that he ever let on to me.

**Reporter:** In Ravi's bio I read that he studied in India. How did that come about?

**Nageswaram:** Mr. Shankaran's teacher, Skandanathan, came here to give a concert. Shankaran took all his students to see the amazing performance, and brought them backstage afterwards. Ravi, then fourteen, was floating on a cloud of bliss. Each student had been asked to prepare one question for the Indian master.

**Reporter:** What was Ravi's question?

**Nageswaram:** "Where does the music come from?"

**Reporter:** Nice question! What was the answer?

**Nageswaram:** "The Gods." He told Ravi there is an entire category of divine beings called *gandharvas*, celestial souls who do nothing but make music all the time. To make divine music, one has to learn to hear the *gandharvas* playing in the Devaloka and play along with them here on Earth. Looking Ravi straight in the eye, Skandanathan proclaimed, "When you can make music like they do, then Siva Himself will dance for you." Some of the other students rolled their eyes, gesturing "Yeah, right." But not Ravi. He ventured a second question, "How can I learn to do that?" "Once you have mastered your instrument, it takes devotion and meditation," came the answer, "Devotion and meditation." After that meeting, our visits to the temple took on new meaning, plus Ravi hauled me off to meditation class. Our roles reversed. It was he pressuring me. In the meditation classes, we learned to feel the energy in our spine, and the energy in our head, which is the source of the energy in our mind and emotions. Ravi caught the idea that music comes from tapping into this energy and letting the divine inspiration flow out in notes and rhythms.

**Reporter:** He could actually do that?

**Nageswaram:** Yes, I was amazed. As he became more devotional, poised and introspective, his music changed. That divine quality you heard tonight started to appear. Sometimes I would look at him practicing and almost see the gandharvas floating above him, furiously playing in a celestial concert with their human colleague.

**Reporter:** How many hours a day did he practice?

**Nageswaram:** You may be surprised, but for the first six years he practiced just ninety minutes a day, in three sessions of thirty minutes each. You should have seen him, so concentrated, so determined to get the rhythms right, so keen to teach his fingers to do what his heart could hear. I think he progressed more in one of those half-hour sessions than most students do in two hours. Plus, by breaking it up, he was fresh for each round. We also set out five opportunities per a day for three thirty-minute session. If he missed one, he could use an alternative time slot. That way he rarely failed to meet his ninety-minute goal.

**Reporter:** But he didn't go to study in India right away, did he?

**Nageswaram:** No. We wanted him to finish high school, but more importantly, he wasn't ready musically. He had more work to do with Shankaran. He had to get near the level his teacher had attained, to study with Shankaran until he could take him no farther. He also had to mature as a person. He had to realize that the most beautiful music is the most disciplined music. And because his practice sessions were not too long, he still had time for other things important to a teenager. In India the demands would be far more...well, demanding.

**Reporter:** Who finally decided that he go to India for those years of advanced training?

**Nageswaram:** God. To become the remarkable drummer Ravi is today, it took God's grace, which he received through the temples, through his meditation and his communion with the devas of music while playing. To those blessings add his innate talent, a passion for the art, diligence, willpower and practice and you have an inkling of how his prodigious musical gifts evolved. When his mother and I hear him play, and then watch the audience respond, all those years of work, work, work seem mercifully distant. Like the audience tonight, we get to bask in the joy and transcendent spirit of a divine music our son is bringing to the Earth.

# Discussion Questions

*Nageswaram Padmanabhan tells the story of how his son Ravi cultivated a stronger-than-usual willpower that helped him become a world-class musician. Willpower, the use of the third chakra, is a key to both worldly and spiritual success. There are many ways to strengthen willpower, a few of which are explored in the story.*

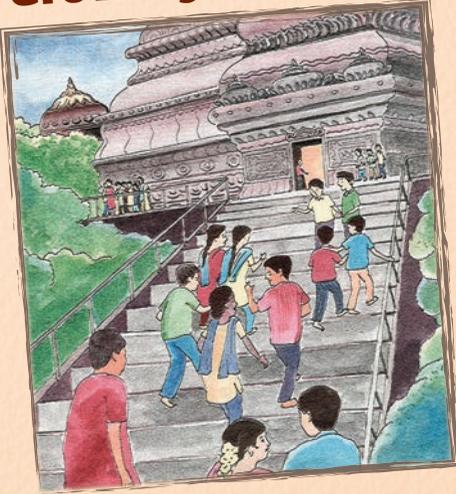
1. Why would Ravi's lack of focus make it difficult for him to develop skill at drumming? Is there something you've wanted to do, but could not stick with long enough?
2. Why was it helpful to break Ravi's tasks into shorter time periods? Would this tactic be effective for everyone?
3. What other tasks might benefit from being broken up into short periods? What tasks would be better uninterrupted?
4. How did Ravi's first teacher test him? What was he trying to find out?
5. How did his parents gradually introduce him to a more intense practice schedule?
6. Have you ever tried to learn a musical instrument? What was your experience with practice time?
7. What did guru Skandanathan say was required for Ravi to play like the gandharvas, the celestial musicians?
8. How did meditation help Ravi with music? Have you learned to meditate? How has it helped you?
9. How are will and physical illness related? Have you ever seen one of your parents working when they were ill? How could they do that? Why is when you're tired or not feeling well a good time to exercise will?
10. What accomplishments in your life can be traced to your use of willpower?
11. Briefly explain the idea that willpower is an unusual energy, since the more you use it, the more you have.





MODERN STORIES FOR HINDU YOUTH: BOOK ONE

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Very often parents come to me for advice on the subject of raising their children as good Hindus. In response, I developed a list of ten key character qualities to develop in a child, basic qualities needed by anyone who wants to be happy, religious and successful when they reach adulthood. These ten stories illustrate how these qualities might be learned when growing up. They are set in modern US, India, Malaysia and Canada and intended for youth 14 and up—the time when we start to take responsibility for our own actions and when these important qualities should manifest.

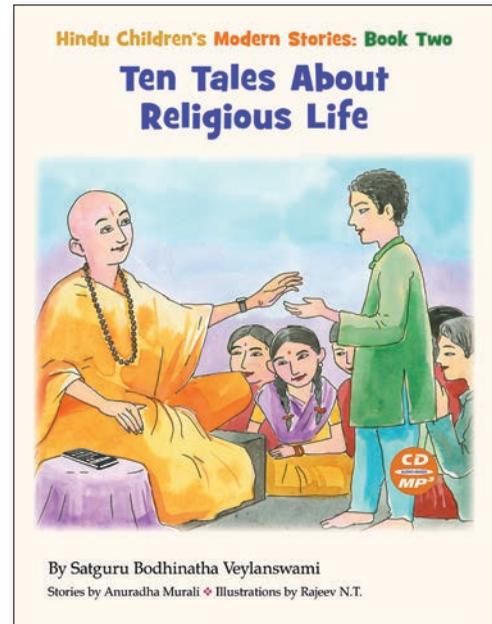
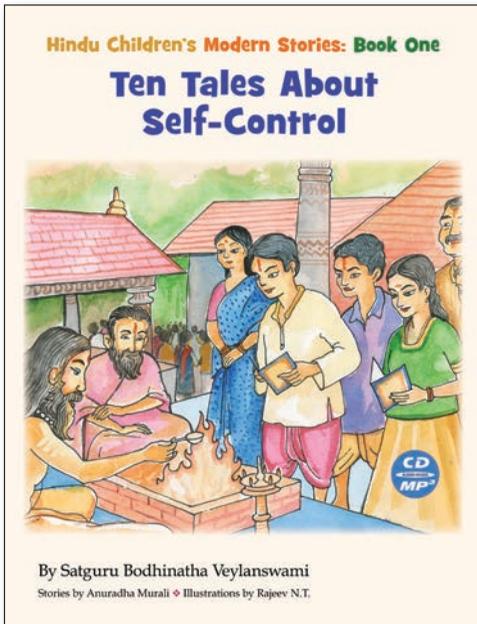
Each story illustrates one concept, generally as instilled by the parents when their child is young and then as demonstrated in the youth when faced with a challenging situation. For example, the first quality, positive self-concept, is illustrated through the story of a young boy who successfully deals with a bully at school. .

Unfortunately, too many parents of all religions believe that disciplining their children simply means to correct and punish them when they make a mistake. However, a more important aspect of discipline is to develop character. I hope that this small set of stories will provide Hindu and non-Hindu parents alike a means of instilling these all-important key character qualities in their children.

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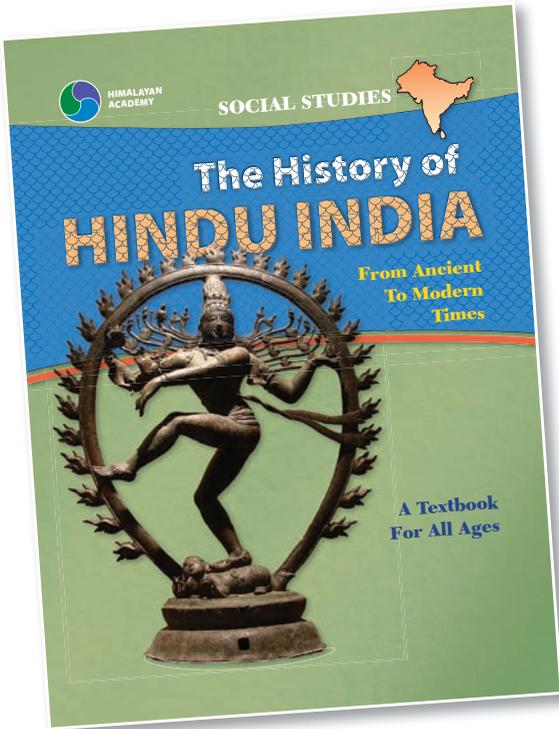
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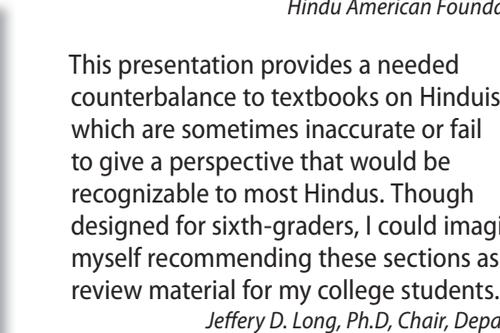
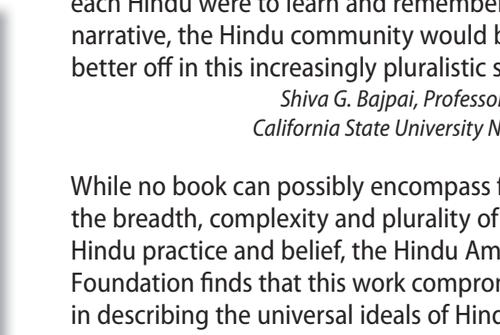
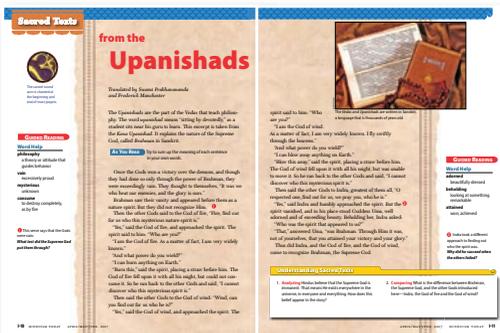
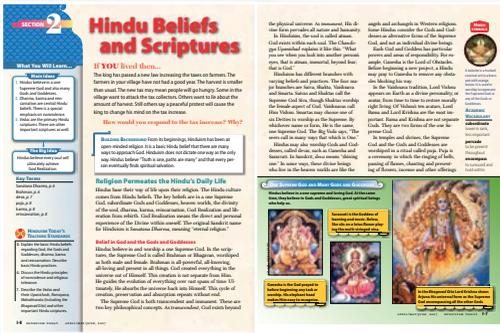
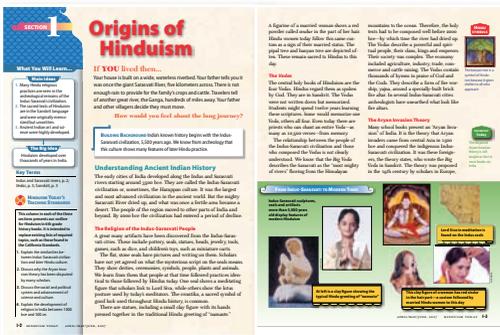
*Shiva G. Bajpai, Professor Emeritus, California State University Northridge*

While no book can possibly encompass fully the breadth, complexity and plurality of Hindu practice and belief, the Hindu American Foundation finds that this work compromises little in describing the universal ideals of Hinduism that have emerged from its wondrous diversity.

*Hindu American Foundation, USA*

This presentation provides a needed counterbalance to textbooks on Hinduism which are sometimes inaccurate or fail to give a perspective that would be recognizable to most Hindus. Though designed for sixth-graders, I could imagine myself recommending these sections as review material for my college students.

*Jeffery D. Long, Ph.D, Chair, Department of Religious Studies, Elizabethtown College, PA, USA*

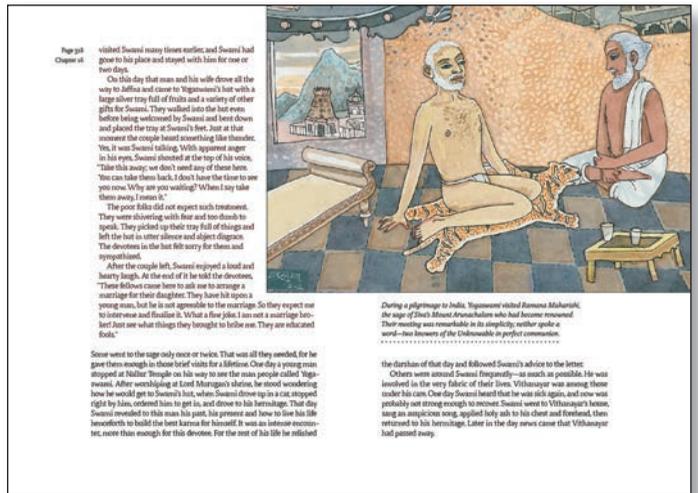
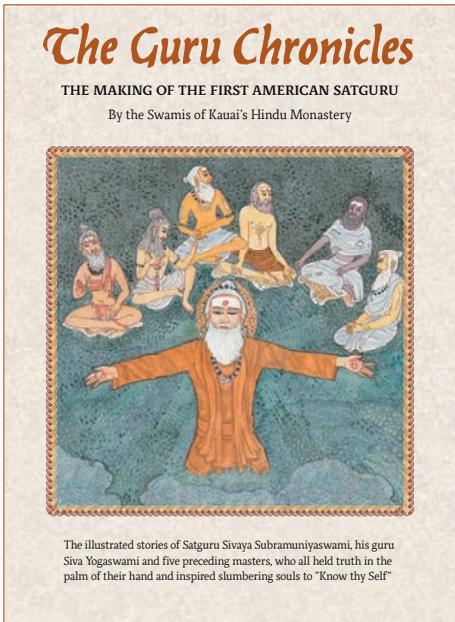


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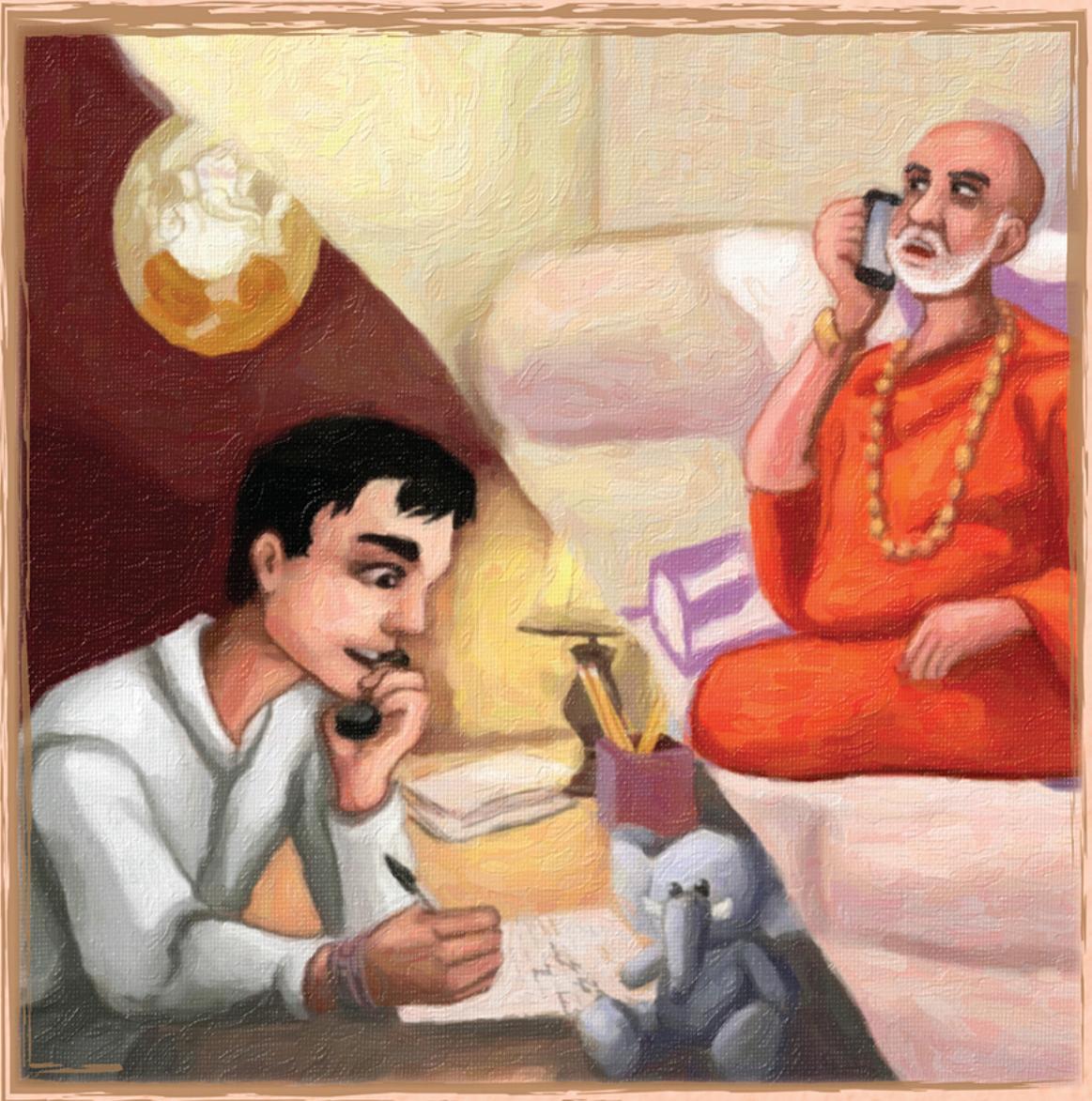
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