

Ten Tales About Religious Life

Hindu Children's Modern Stories: BOOK TWO By Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami

Introduction

The collection of stories in Books One and Two of Hindu Childrens' Modern Stories was written and illustrated at my request to convey Hinduism's ethical and moral values and basic religious observances, the traditional yamas and niyamas, to a new generation. The stories, set in India and America, are intended for children ages ten to twelve, when it is natural to learn about being good. Each story speaks to the wisdom and practical application of a single religious observance, such as remorse, contentment, faith or austerity. For example, in "Be Satisfied with What You Have," Yogesh, a Hindu boy born in America, is distraught with having to visit his grandparent's computer-less home in Chennai.

His grandfather, sensing Yogesh is out of touch with the real world, sends him to their ancestral village to visit his great uncle. There he befriends the local boys, shares their rich life and realizes how content he can be without e-mail, Facebook or even a local mall. Several stories focus on practical application of religion, showing how if children sincerely appeal to God and the Gods for help, help will be forthcoming. Hinduism is portrayed as a "do-it-yourself" religion, one that works if you make it work.

For example, in "Praying for Ganesha's Help," Vasuki, whose father has lost his job, does not sit by idly and wait for him to find one. Instead, she takes a personal vow to daily worship Lord Ganesha in their shrine on Dad's behalf with a garland she makes herself. Inspired by his daughter's devotion, Dad never gives up, and after weeks of hunting does indeed find a good job, better even than the one he lost. The stories follow the nonviolent child-raising principles of Positive Discipline: avoidance of corporal punishment, seeing mistakes as opportunities for teaching and letting children learn by fully facing the consequences of their own actions. Unfortunately, ethics and morals are ignored subjects in most of the world's schools today. I hope that this small set of stories will provide Hindu and non-Hindu parents alike one means to convey these all important character-building values to their children.

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1. The Bicycle Thieves - Hri, Remorse

Summer vacation was starting to seem long and boring. On the outskirts of Pondicherry in South India Rohit kicked a pebble down the street a few miles from his home. "There are too many rules. Don't do this, don't do that! And when I ask my parents the reason, they say I'm too young to understand! Bah! I'm not young! I'll be twelve this September!" Nilakantha watched his friend's face. "What's Rohit up to?" A slight feeling of fear tingled up his spine. Nilakantha liked Rohit a lot, though he didn't always approve of his ways. But then that was what made him exciting to be with!

There was nothing boring about him. Walking down the street, they noticed a shiny blue bicycle leaning against a building. Rohit's eyes lit up. "Wow! What a beauty! I need to take that for a ride!"

Nilakantha looked with disbelief at Rohit, "Hey! We have our own bikes. Why do you need to ride this one?" "Silly! Stolen food tastes better! Don't you know? Come on! Or are you chicken?" Stung by the words, Nilakantha objected, "I'm not chicken!" "Come on then! What are we waiting for?" Matching his words with his actions, Rohit ran to the bike, "What luck! It's not even locked." Wheeling it to the road, he climbed on the seat and whispered, "Jump on the back!" Against his better judgment, Nilakantha climbed aboard, and off they rode. Nilakantha was too scared to turn around and see if anyone was watching them.

They rode along merrily till they reached Shanti Grove. Its pine trees were tall and strong, casting a soft shadow on the ground. The two rode in the woods for a long time. Finally they stopped to rest, and Nilakantha said, "Rohit, we have been playing with this bike for over an hour. When are we returning it? The owner must be pretty worried and upset that it is missing!" Rohit laughed loudly and said, "Who said we were going to return it? Do you think they'll find it funny and just let us go if we give it back to them now? No way! They'll hand us over to the cops, that's what they'll do." Nilakantha felt his lunch rising up to his throat. He swallowed hard and stood still for a moment. His head felt light and dizzy. Police! What would his parents think? His father would lower his head in shame and his mother would cry.

Oh, why had he listened to Rohit? "Don't worry, pal, I have a plan." Saying that, Rohit jumped back on the bike and rode fast to the lake at the center of the grove. Nilakantha ran panting behind him. Suddenly he heard a loud splash. When he caught up with Rohit, he saw the bicycle slowly sinking into the muddy lakebed, a few yards offshore. "What have you done?" he screamed.

"Stop it! Don't shout! We can't do anything else. Come on, let's go back home." Back in town, Arumugam, the owner of the bike, came out of the office. The boss's assistant had just told him, "This letter must be delivered to the bank within 30 minutes." Arumugam wasn't worried. He knew he could get there much faster than that on his new bicycle. The thought of his bike brought a smile to his face. He had wanted a bike all his life, but because of all the other expenses, including looking after his two little daughters, his wife, his sisters and his parents, there never seemed to be enough money. Somehow, with God's blessings, he had finally bought the bicycle, a big accomplishment for a man who had never gone to school. As he stepped out the door, he suddenly knew the bike was gone. Instinctively, he felt the loss even before he saw the empty space where he had parked it. He had a second to make up his mind. He could stand there and raise a noise about his missing bike, or he could get the letter to the bank. Duty came first, so he dashed off, with tears dimming his sight.

Arumugam was a simple man who did not even own a watch. He calculated the time of day by looking at the sun. A half an hour had little meaning to him. He walked with quick strides to the bank. The road was long, and the distance seemed even longer. When he finally reached the bank, he was upset to see the sign, "Closed for the day." He hurriedly asked a passerby, "What is the time?" "Ten past one." Arumugam realized that he had walked for more than an hour! "When will the bank be open?" he asked the watchman. "Today's Friday. Won't be open till Monday."

Sorry." Stunned and helpless, feeling a loss greater than the loss of the bike, Arumugam walked back to the office, hanging his head. "What! You didn't deliver the package?" Mahadevan, Arumugam's boss, cried out. "bicycle thieves have to steal that poor man's bike? He saved money for years to buy it." A few tears rolled onto his plate, and Nilakantha did not try to wipe them. Suddenly he blurted out, "Appa, I, I stole the bike." Later he wondered what had made him confess; but as he did so a huge weight was lifted from his shoulders. Srinatha stared at his son as though he was seeing him for the first time.

"You don't mean that!" Seeing the intense pain Nilakantha was in, he softened his tone, "Why, son? Why did you do it?" Nilakantha remembered Rohit's face, but what would be achieved by telling his father about Rohit? Sobbing quietly, he confessed, "Appa, it was just for fun. I'm so sorry." That afternoon, father and son walked up to Mahadevan's office. As poor Arumugam told the sad story, Mahadevan shook his head, not knowing whether to laugh or to cry. He felt his plans crash around him.

The parcel had contained his bid for a government construction project. The deadline for submissions was the end of Friday. Because of Arumugam's failure, the bid would never even be considered. This was an important project, and the company had to keep ahead of the hard economic times. "You may have cost me my company, Arumugam! I cannot employ you any longer. You are fired." With slumped shoulders, Mahadevan turned, walked into his office and closed the door. Arumugam left the building in shock. What would he say to his wife? What would he do? The job was so important to his family. The next day, at lunchtime, Nilakantha just picked at his food. His father, Srinatha, was explaining yesterday's incident.

He had heard about it from his friend who worked for Mahadevan. "Why did the The rest of the weekend was a storm of tears and remorse for Nilakantha. But with the remorse, there arose a new strength of character, which his father did not miss. On Sunday evening, father and son sat outside the house watching the sunset. Srinatha spoke, "Son, I know you too well. You could not have done this on your own. Who was with you? Was it Rohit?" Nilakantha kept quiet, and his father knew he was right. "I thought so. I will speak with Rohit's father. And son, I know you had to go through this incident to realize your strength. You will never again be weak enough to fall into wrongdoing.

I see how much you have regretted stealing, and I know you will never do such a thing again. I am proud of how you have benefitted from the experience." Srinatha hugged his boy tightly. Monday was a busy day. Srinatha took Nilakantha with him to be present as he talked to the bank manager and then with Mahadevan Arumugam was sitting outside on the step, looking lost, sipping a cup of tea. "My son took your cycle." The very words seemed to age his father. Arumugam bowed his head, "It is okay, sir. Boys love to ride bicycles. Your son is, after all, like my son!" Srinatha pulled some bills from his pocket and pressed them into Arumugam's hands. "We are very sorry. Please buy yourself a new bike."

As Srinatha turned to walk away, Arumugam asked, "Sir, can you help get me a new job?" "Why? What happened?" Arumugam explained that he had been fired for failing to deliver the package. "Oh, no!" Nilakantha thought, "Not only did I steal his bike, I cost him his job, too!" His mind wandered to the scene of the bike sinking into the lake. "Ok. Let's go," he heard his father order sternly. Like most stories where "all's well that ends well," this story, too, saw everything being cleared up. Due to Srinatha's influence, the bank accepted Mahadevan's late proposal. Arumugam not only got his job back, he was given a raise for his selfless attitude which had made him walk to the bank instead of going to the police to report the theft of his bicycle. Nilakantha knew that while his father and Arumugam had forgiven him for the incident, and he had made amends by helping to get Arumugam's job back, he still needed to do penance for his crime.

He had always been taught that life's actions, good or bad, come back to us. That Friday he gathered 108 flowers in a basket and went to the temple. As he had seen his father do, he prostrated before Lord Murugan and offered a flower. He did 108 prostrations, one for each flower. It took almost two hours. As he got up from the 108th prostration, he saw a white light enter his heart and felt a great rush of kindness and forgiveness. It seemed to come from the silver Vel in the hand of Lord Murugan. He knew then that he was free from the ill effects of his action. Srinatha talked to Rohit's father, and the two of them shared the cost of the bike. Rohit had to confess to stealing the bike, but he felt no remorse; he only regretted getting caught. The idea of doing penance never occurred to him. He would just be more careful next time, and surely not choose Nilakantha as a partner! Vacation ended and school was back in session.

Nilakantha was worried about how Rohit would behave toward him. They were not really friends anymore. They had not been together since the day they took the bike. He was surprised one day when Rohit showed up late for school. The next morning, while riding to school, Nilakantha saw Rohit walking along the pathway. "Rohit, where's your bike?" he asked as he stopped to give him a ride. Rohit scowled, "Someone stole it. I left it outside the game parlor, and when I came out, it was gone. Cursed luck!" Yes, it seems two boys had taken his bike for a joyride and then thrown it in a ditch in hopes of not being discovered.

2. Be Satisfied with What You Have - Santosha, Contentment

Yogesh's parents seemed to have no time for him ever since they arrived in Chennai two days ago. His mother jabbered endlessly with relatives, and his father seemed mostly interested in sitting down for meal after home-cooked meal. His grandpa and grandma made a fuss over him; but even though they spoke English, they could not understand his American accent. He knew enough Tamil to communicate. His mother had insisted he learn, but he had never been comfortable with it. He was not interested in being taken to the beach, nor for ice cream. He wanted to play on a computer, but this house did not have one. He asked his mother to buy one, but Grandpa laughed at the idea and said, "After you go back to the US, what will I do with a computer?"

This old man doesn't even know how to operate a TV remote!" Yogesh wished he found it as funny as his relatives. So what if they were in India? Couldn't they be more modern? He could not imagine anyone in the US living without a computer. One day as they sat together, Grandpa asked Yogesh, "What do you play back home?" "I play on my Xbox and Nintendo." "Are they your friends?" Yogesh groaned, "Grandpa, they are game consoles that you connect to your television and play." "Oh! Then what about friends?" "Friends? I have more than 200!" "200? That's a lot for a young boy!" said Grandpa. "Where did you meet them?" "On Facebook." "Where is Facebook? Is that a park?" asked Grandpa innocently.

"Grandpa," exclaimed Yogesh with growing frustration, "Facebook is an Internet social networking site where people meet and interact." "Without seeing each other?" Grandpa was amazed. Yogesh offered eagerly, "Yes. You should get yourself a computer too, and make some good friends. There are lots of interesting people out there." Grandpa grew silent for a few minutes, deep in thought. Then he asked, "Do you like India?" "Frankly, no! There's nothing to do here. The boys are playing cricket all the time. When I try to teach them baseball, they laugh at me. I miss my games and my computer."

Grandpa suggested, "In that case, instead of being stuck here, I think you should go and see our family's native village. You can stay with your great uncle, my brother. It's a few hours' drive from here." Figuring that it couldn't be worse than being here, Yogesh agreed. The next day, he got into a hired car and left for the village. He rolled down the windows, and a warm breeze blew into the car. He watched the passing scenery. Soon the city was far behind them. Green rice fields lined each side of the road their car shared with bullock carts, huge buses and trucks. The green complemented the blue of the sky, and the scene was pretty. It was evening when they reached Natrampalli, a little village outside Vellore.

The car bumped down a narrow side road for at least a kilometer, then stopped. They got out near a cow shelter. Outside the barn, a white cow mooed at them loudly. Yogesh peeped around the side and saw a small calf grazing on tender grass. A short distance away, he saw a whitewashed house with a little lamp hanging outside. His great uncle, Abhiraman, came out and paid the driver. "Son, welcome home," he said with a toothless smile. Yogesh walked into the house. His grandpa's home in Chennai was spartan, but it was a palace compared to this place. There was absolutely nothing here. No sofa, no dining table. no furniture whatsoever, except for a cane bed, a few mats and some large gunny bags filled to bursting with grains. He ran out to get back in the car, but to his dismay, it was disappearing into the distance. A tear rolled down his cheek.

How he hated this! Why had he agreed to come? Why had Mom let him go, knowing what it would be like? "Where's the bathroom?" he asked Uncle. "Bathroom? Come with me," replied Abhiraman, and took him to a roofless room through which the moon shone down. He didn't remember the rest of the evening. He had fallen asleep, sad and upset, on the simple cane bed. In the morning, a tender breeze blew in and woke him up. "Uncle, where's the shower?" Abhiraman led him to the well and showed him how to bring up buckets of water to pour over his body. Yogesh found that he was not as upset as he had been yesterday. "Well, this is a different way to bathe," he thought, "but it works."

He returned to the cottage, where his uncle was holding a glass of frothy milk for him. "Where do you buy milk, Uncle? Is there a supermarket nearby?" asked Yogesh hopefully. "There are no shops here. We produce our own food. The milk is fresh from our cows. Do you know how to milk a cow?" "No..." replied Yogesh. "Well, then, it's time to learn." Yogesh soon found himself sitting on a short stool next to an 800-pound cow. Milking the cow was not easy but, Yogesh had to admit, it was fun.

He was actually starting to enjoy himself! In the distance, he saw a boy around his own age who was leading a small herd of goats. Shyly he walked up and introduced himself, using the best Tamil he could muster. The boy, Mani, had dark skin, a mop of curly hair and shining white teeth. Within a few minutes the two felt like old friends. Mani asked, "Do you want to see some of the things we do here in the village?" Yogesh felt a surge of excitement. "Sure! I'd like that," he said, thinking of the stories he will have to tell his friends back in the US. As Mani herded the goats forward with a sturdy stick, they set off on a path between green paddy fields. Soon they came upon a coconut grove.

Mani climbed up a tree and threw down a tender coconut. Slipping back down, he chopped an opening in the coconut and gave it to Yogesh. "Drink this!" Yogesh drank it eagerly. "This is the sweetest tasting water on earth! Wow!" Next Mani guided them to a hill where a group of boys were playing. Mani called out to them, "Come and meet Yogesh; he is from Bombay!" Yogesh shot back, "Not Bombay! USA!" "It doesn't matter. For us, both are the same!" Yogesh laughed at the statement and suddenly felt lighthearted. These boys had a simple and easy view of life. In their company, he began to relax.

They climbed the hillock and ate wild berries. They swam in the lake on the other side, and Mani dug up some kind of root vegetable and roasted it on an open fire. When the sun started nearing the horizon, they headed back home. When they reached the house, Uncle Abhiraman was standing outside with a worried look on his face. But when he saw Yogesh's excitement, he smiled and called him in for supper. freshly cooked rice with sambar and fried potatoes. Mani said goodbye and herded the goats to his family's home. Hungry and tired, Yogesh ate heartily. That night, as he lay in the cane bed, he watched the stars outside twinkling merrily, and he saw a few fireflies behaving like stars on Earth.

The next morning, after bathing at the well, he milked the cow, with more than a little help from Uncle, and collected some vegetables from the garden. Soon Mani came for him. Today Yogesh asked permission, "Uncle, may I go out with Mani this morning?" "Certainly! Have a good time together." With a big "Thank you!" the two set off to the hillock. This time, the boys wanted to play some games. They taught him marbles and kabaddi. He found that playing marbles was difficult, but kabaddi was easy for him. He enjoyed scuffling around on the ground, pushing, pulling and tugging. It was a bit like tag, but with a lot more running, plus you have to hold your breath for part of it.

Although he washed his clothes at the well every day, his new jeans were soon a dirty brown color. His t-shirt, too, looked like it had seen better days. But Yogesh couldn't care less. What amazed him the most was that everyone in the village was happy. When he arrived, he had thought, "This is a such a poor village." But after a few days, he couldn't figure out what they were missing. They had good, fresh food, they had comfortable houses, they had the beauty of nature, and they had each other. Nobody felt they needed computers, TV, Internet, or even iPhones.

They were totally content. The next few days passed quickly in a similar fashion. Soon it was time to head back to Chennai. Yogesh decided to give a gift to each of the boys. They flocked around him as he dug into his bag for things to give away. He gave his watch to Mani. "My goodness!" Mani shouted, "This is beautiful. Thank you. I don't really need it, since I can tell the time by the sun. But it looks good, and it makes me feel like a man." To Sagar, one of the kabbadi players, he gave his best pair of sneakers. To little Varendra he presented his hand video game. The boy tried to put it in his shorts pocket, which was torn, and the console kept falling out. Yogesh wasn't really sure what Varendra would do with it, but at least it would be a souvenir of his visit.

As Yogesh watched the car approach, his uncle and a few villagers came and stood by him. Yogesh turned to Abhiraman, "Uncle, thank you for everything. Thank you for teaching me how to milk the cow and thank you for teaching me that I don't need expensive gadgets to be content. These have been the happiest few days of my life." Varendra was beginning to cry, and Mani looked like he too might shed a tear. Yogesh hugged Mani, "I will come back next year to see you. I promise! I will write letters from America, too." As the car neared Chennai, Yogesh realized that he had not even thought of his computer for a week. He didn't miss his games, and he felt no need to check up on his 200 Facebook friends. All the relatives were waiting to greet him as the car pulled into the driveway.

Yogesh jumped out and hugged his grandpa. "Thank you for sending me to our native village. It was the greatest experience of my life. I was so happy there, and now I know I can be happy anywhere!"

3. Tithing and the Family Budget -Dana, Giving

Senthil said to Muthu, "Appa called me to the study, not you." "He called me, too," insisted Muthu. It was the first time the two boys, Muthu, 12, and Senthil, 14, had been called to the study for a meeting. It was their father's den and they knew lots of important discussions happened there. Appa opened the door and smiled, "Welcome to my den!" Amma was there, too, sitting in a chair beside the desk. When Appa smiled, two sharp dimples appeared on his cheeks, making his face look soft and kind. His hair was now gray, and when he walked, his body was bent more than before.

Still, for the two children, he was the dearest man in the whole world. "I heard an argument outside," he said with a twinkle in his eyes. "Appa, Senthil says you called him only and not me!" answered Muthu. "No. I wanted to see both of you. Amma and I want to talk to you about the gift you received from Grandma and Grandpa for Pancha Ganapati. How much was it, again?" "\$101 each," exclaimed Muthu. "I'm going to buy a bicycle and a Wii and five new video games!" "Not so fast," said Amma with a laugh.

"Remember when you each got \$25 from your aunt and uncle for your last birthday? What was the first thing we did with the money?" "I remember," said Senthil. "We put \$2.50 each in the donation box the next time we went to the temple. You said that was God's share of the money, 'teething' I think you called it. But doesn't God already have enough money?" "I suppose He does," replied Appa, "and its 'tithing,' not 'teething.' Tithing is a spiritual practice for our own benefit, not because God needs more money, though the temple can certainly use it to pay bills. Then we always have a nice temple to go to." Appa sat down at the desk beside Amma and pulled up two chairs for the children.

Today's discussion was part of teaching the boys about money. Unlike in many families, the boys were not given allowances. Instead, if they needed something, they asked Appa or Amma for the amount and afterwards turned in an accounting. Most of their friends got a weekly allowance, but Muthu and Senthil had both noticed their friends tended to waste the money on junk food and unneeded items. It was a little difficult for them, but as young as they were, they appreciated their family's system of handling money. "Do you both know what the word budget means?" asked Amma. "I know! I know!" Senthil called out, "It's the amount of money that's supposed to be spent on something each month.

Like last month, you said our monthly electrical bill was over the budget. You said we have to be really careful to turn off the lights so that we keep the bill down." "That's right," replied Amma. "In the same way, we have a budget of \$80 to have dinner in a nice restaurant once a month. In fact, we have a written budget for all other family expenses. However, the first expense is always tithing. Then we put money aside, some for emergencies and some for your college educations. After that comes the home mortgage, taxes to the government, and car payments. These are always the same amount, and we pay them every month. We also have expenses for food, clothing, vacation and so on.

Now, since you have gotten a large gift, we are going to write down a budget for it. But first we want to talk more about tithing. Any questions so far?" "Why is tithing the first expense?" asked Muthu. "What if there isn't enough money for food and other expenses?" Appa replied, "Tithing means 'one-tenth.' In ancient India, people set aside one-tenth to one-sixth of their income for religious work.

For our family, each month I send our Guruji ten percent of our earnings. I have taken a vow to do so. It is part of our spiritual practice.” “Wow, isn’t that a lot of money?” asked Senthil. “Why do you do it?” “Well,” replied Appa, “When I was young, I never gave money to anyone at all. I didn’t think I could afford it. Then I met Guruji, and he taught me that tithing on my income brings God’s blessings on the money. At that time I didn’t quite know what he meant by that, perhaps that I would win the lottery!” Appa laughed. “I didn’t win the lottery, but something even more wonderful happened.

Before I started tithing, I was always short of money. I didn’t keep track of how I spent the money I earned each month. I even owed some people money that I could not pay. Then, I made a budget, so I knew just how much I could spend each month. That way, I could tithe and still not run out of money. At first it was hard, especially since I wasn’t making much. However, I made up my mind to tithe each month and never miss. So, I started to look very carefully at how I spent money. Also, I hadn’t been saving anything for emergencies.” “That’s not very smart,” Muthu interjected. “No!” Appa replied, “It’s not smart at all. Sometimes in an emergency, there is a need for extra money! So, in addition to the tithe, I started saving five percent of my salary each month.

This made it even harder to pay all the bills! Then I found how to stop being wasteful. For example, instead of buying light bulbs one at a time, I went to the big store and bought two dozen all at once at half price. I also started to bring coffee to work in a thermos from home instead of buying a big cup of coffee at Starbucks each day. I found I saved \$70 a month just on coffee!” “I think I understand,” said Senthil, “that’s the reason why Amma buys cases of things. I couldn’t understand why it is cheaper, because a whole case is expensive. Now I see. It’s cheaper in the long run.” “You both know that I always give you money for what you need,” Appa said, “but I don’t give you an allowance to spend as you please like other families do.

You get money for a purpose and you turn in an accounting.” “Sometimes that’s hard,” complained Muthu. “Yes, it is,” Appa replied, “but your mother and I do the same thing ourselves. We account for everything. You have to know how you spent your money, otherwise you will never know if you have kept within your budget.” “So, back to my story. I kept to the budget and found out we always had enough for what we really needed.” Appa went on, “I was very pleased to give money to Guruji for his noble work. And God did bless us. The two boons we got were that we no longer owed money and we actually started saving for the future. That was twenty years ago.

Today we have an emergency fund and a college fund for each of you. Those blessings came to our family because we tithed.” Senthil gazed at his father, “Your faith in God is the best gift you have given me, Appa. I love what you are doing. Next time we visit Guruji, I will ask him about tithing.” “Very good. Now, about the budget,” said Amma. “Muthu, how much would all the things you want to buy cost?” “I don’t know,” replied Muthu sheepishly. “Maybe \$75?” Some quick research on the Web showed it was at least several hundred dollars. It was far more than the boys could afford, even if they combined their gifts. So Amma had them both make a list of what they wanted and how much it would all cost, both new and used. For example, they learned that a used Wii console on eBay was half that of a new one, and a used video game was less than a third the cost of the new one. What difference did it make if a video game was used or new?

They created a budget.

First, \$20.20 went to tithing, ten percent of their combined \$202. Then they decided that since Senthil already had a good bike, they would only get a new one for Muthu. Plus they would buy the Wii console and some games, all used. Appa congratulated them. "This is a great budget, boys. You thought through what you wanted and how to get everything at a good price. This is just what your mother and I do at the beginning of each month. I think, however, we should get you both new bikes. We will sell Senthil's old one, and Amma and I will make up the difference." "I'm proud of you," said Amma. "You will find that when you make it a discipline to tithe and do it as your first expense, you will start to ask yourself if you really need what you are about to buy.

This will help you to control your desire and channel it toward useful things." And so concluded the boys' lesson that year in money, budgets and tithing. When they got ready to enter college, there would be more discussions and explanations to help them manage their finances just as wisely as their parents do, always remembering that their first expense is for God's work.

4. The Milk Miracle - Astikya, Faith

The pillars were so tall they seemed to reach the sky. The floor was so shiny that Revati could see her face in it clearly. Between the four pillars was a white marble statue of Nandi, Lord Siva's gentle bull. The white marble made Nandi's skin glow, and eight-year-old Revati loved to stand and watch His serene face. The soft gaze of His eyes made her feel secure. The date was September 21, 1995, and the Milk Miracle was about to start right here at this small temple in Delhi. Revati's story is based on what really happened that day.

The miracle quickly spread to temples and shrines all over the world. Inside the temple, in the inner sanctum, Revati's father, the temple priest, was chanting Sanskrit as he performed the puja. Their house was just around the corner and school began at 8:00 am, but Revati never missed the morning worship. The smell of incense mingled with the fragrance of fresh flowers was a delight to the nose. The freshly ground sandalwood paste applied on Lord Ganesha's forehead was delightful. She could smell it throughout the temple. These sweet scents remained with her all day. She watched some people walk into the temple for their morning worship, as usual.

Suddenly, a young man rushed in. "This is unusual," she thought. "Why is he in such a hurry? Ganesha isn't going anywhere, after all." Standing near a pillar, she watched as the man, all out of breath, ran up to the sanctum and called to her father, "Panditji! Panditji! Ganeshji is hungry. He wants milk!" A deep frown came over her father's face. Once the puja had begun inside the sanctum, it was not supposed to be interrupted. She wished the young man had waited till the puja was over. But over and over again he kept repeating, "Ganesh is hungry!" She even wondered if the man was a little crazy. Her father now showed some interest. Perhaps there was something to this strange request? He stopped his puja, came to the front of the sanctum and asked the man, "Why do you think Ganesha is hungry?" "I saw him in my dream. He asked for milk. See, I brought milk with me." He pulled out a little bottle, poured some milk into a spoon, and before anyone could stop him, entered the sanctum and placed the spoon near Ganesha's mouth.

The oil lamp inside the sanctum flickered for a moment, then started to burn more brightly. "A divine sign?" Revati wondered. She stood on her tiptoes and peered closely at the spoon, as did the other devotees. To everyone's surprise, the milk in the spoon disappeared. Again the man filled the spoon and held it before Ganesha, and again the milk vanished. Her father took the bottle and spoon and gave it a try. The milk vanished. Within a few minutes, the news began to spread like wildfire. Those who saw it happen ran to their homes and telephoned relatives and friends all across India, and overseas, too. Revati stayed at the temple, and to her amazement, hundreds of people soon appeared at the gates, each carrying milk for Ganesha. With too many to offer milk to Ganesha, some offered it to Lord Siva, and then to Nandi, and both Deities consumed the milk.

Revati's mother, Ambika, also heard the news and brought milk for Ganesha. "Come, Revati! You and I can try it, too!" She held a spoonful before the stone image and giggled as the milk vanished. She had never experienced anything like this before. It was a miracle! As the crowd began to fill and overflow the temple, Ambika said, "We should go now," and they walked quickly to their nearby home. As they walked through the doorway, the phone rang. It was Revati's uncle, calling from London. "Ganesha is taking milk! Ganesha is taking milk!" he yelled into the phone.

Well, Uncle always yelled into the phone, as if it was still like the old days when phone connections between England and India were not so good. "Really?" Ambika asked excitedly. "He is drinking milk here, too, in our own temple! We just came from there minutes ago. Hundreds of people have come to offer milk. We think the miracle happened here first!" Uncle yelled, "I put the spoon up to his trunk, and the milk disappeared. Hundreds of people did it. It's actually on BBC today."

The afternoon newspapers in Delhi were all calling it "the milk miracle." The reports were sympathetic, though they included comments by skeptics who said it was all some sort of mass craziness. "Capillary action, obviously," said one scientist who had not witnessed it himself. He was talking about how a liquid can move upwards, against gravity. Capillary action is seen when a towel is put in water. The water is drawn up by capillary action. Even the parts of the towel above the water get wet. But the doubters were challenged by others, equally qualified, who had offered milk themselves. Aparna Chattopadhyay of New Delhi wrote in the Hindustan Times, "I am a senior scientist of the Indian Agriculture Research Institute, New Delhi.

I found my offerings of milk in a temple being mysteriously drunk by the Deities. How can the scientists explain the copper snake absorbing the milk I offered with a spoon kept at a good distance away from it?" Revati went to school, but many students and even some of the teachers were missing. They had gone to the temples to offer milk. The entire class was talking about the miracle and not the day's lesson. "Our store is completely out of milk," said Vikram, whose father owned a big grocery market. "We can't get more milk anywhere in Delhi." "My relatives called from Mauritius," said Skanda. "The Ganesha at Tulsi Sham Temple in Beau Bassin is taking milk.

My cousin Palani said, 'I rushed there, leaving all my jobs behind. I took some milk and brought it close to the trunk without spilling any. The milk was taken very quickly.'" "My brother called from New York," chimed in Ganesan. "The big Ganesha temple in Flushing was still packed with people at 2:00 am, he said. Not only Ganesha but also Siva and Nandi took milk there. His college friend Manisha Lund said, 'It was sucked up, like someone was drinking it with a straw.'" "Our friends in Los Angeles called us," pitched in Savitri. "They said even the reporter for the local TV station, Sharon Tae, who isn't even a Hindu, offered milk and had it accepted. But they said it wasn't happening at all temples, and some people were skeptical. They didn't believe it. But many had the milk offering accepted at the Chatsworth temple in Southern California." Revati went home after school to find long lines still outside her family temple.

She snuck in to see what was going on. With the hundreds of gallons of milk that had been offered, there should have been milk all over the floor and even pouring out the door. But beyond small amounts spilled here and there, there was very little milk to be seen! Finally, by late evening, the crowds started thinning, not because there was any lack of excitement, but because the city of Delhi had run out of milk! Father finally returned home early the next morning, many hours after the temple's usual closing time. Just as he came in, his cousin Jai called from Nairobi in Africa. "Fifteen thousand people belonging to all castes and nationalities, Hindus, Sikhs, Africans and Europeans, made offerings," Jai reported. "No one here of any religion has ever seen such a thing in their life. It is the same at many other temples here in Kenya."

The next day, attempts to give Ganesha milk were unsuccessful, and the Milk Miracle ended as quickly as it had begun. School was closed that day. When Revati's father awoke, she asked him, "Daddy, why did Ganesha take milk?" "I think He wanted us to have more faith in Him and all the Gods. People are just too skeptical these days. Even with this miracle here we had people saying it was 'capillary action' and such nonsense. Ganesha consumed hundreds of liters of milk in my temple alone. My brother said one big store in London next to a temple sold 35,000 cartons of milk that day for offering to Ganesha. Where did the milk go?" "Have things like this happened before?" she asked. "There are many stories of miracles, not only in Hinduism, but in all religions.

The closest to the Milk Miracle is the story of Nambi, a South Indian saint who lived a thousand years ago. He offered food to Ganesha and it disappeared, just like the milk yesterday. Nambi was just a boy at the time. Similarly, there are miraculous stories connected with many of our saints." "Well," Revati sighed, "I will certainly never forget the day Ganesha accepted milk from me! It makes me think: If He can drink milk, what other things can He do?"

5. Praying for Ganesha's Help - Ishvarapujana, Worship of the Lord

Mr. Sivanath felt a chill run through his spine as if hit by a blast of cold winter wind. Words he had never expected to hear from his boss had been spoken to him earlier today. His manager, Mr. Madan Mohan, repeated frightful words about the world's economic plight, such as downturn and recession, over and over again as he explained why he had to let Sivanath go from the company. Madan could not look Sivanath in the eye as he fired him, even though they were friends. Before the recession, they often played golf together. Mr. Mohan had come to Sivanath's house for dinner several times.

As he got out of his car in front of his house, Sivanath thought, "Obviously it was a difficult task for Mr. Mohan. But as a manager in the company, he had to carry out his orders. He had no choice. I actually feel sorry for him," Twilight had descended and the trees were covered with raindrops. The earth around him glowed with light from the moon, and he felt his feet sinking into the soft earth. How could he tell this sad news to his family? His wife Aparna was a housewife by choice. She had a good job before they were married. But once Siva and Vasuki were born, Aparna decided to stay at home and look after them. Money had never been a problem. With Sivanath working as a senior service engineer in a leading IT company, life seemed cozy and bright for this family.

The future looked so good that last year Sivanath had invited his aged parents to stay with them. They needed care, so Aparna could not go back to work to help solve Sivanath's new dilemma. As he walked towards the front door, Sivanath realized he should have seen it coming. There had been several rounds of budget cuts at the company. Other people had already been let go, and new projects were getting more and more rare. The senior executives were meeting in secret. "I should have been ready for this!" The scene inside the house was like a picture postcard. In the large sitting room, his father was dozing peacefully in a comfortable armchair. Mother was stitching a blouse. Twelve-year-old Vasuki was crouched on the floor doing a painting, and eight-year-old Siva was calling out, "Mom, Mom, Mom," to show her a new discovery.

Aparna was in the kitchen cooking. Delicious smells filled the rooms. Later that night, after his parents had retired to their room, Sivanath told Aparna what had happened. After a moment's shocked silence, Aparna realized that Sivanath was really upset. She tried to cheer him up. "Oh! It is nothing!! If one door closes, Siva will open another!!! You are sure to get another job. Don't worry." Her kind words and bright smile lightened his mood. He would hunt for a job tomorrow morning. So thinking, Sivanath fell asleep. Meanwhile, little Vasuki had heard the whole conversation from the next room.

She was worried. She recalled the day, last year, when her friend Reena had been picked from school up by her father in the middle of the day. "Probably they are going on a special vacation," one girl suggested. But another explained, "Because Reena's father has lost his job, he can't afford to keep her in this school any longer." Vasuki wondered, "Might that happen to me, too? Will I have to move to a new school? Will I have to say goodbye to all my friends?" Suddenly her conscience scolded her. It was so selfish to worry about herself when her father had so much more to worry about. She closed her eyes and prayed to Lord Ganesha, "Dearest Ganesha, I will come to the shrine room tomorrow and speak to you."

The next morning, Vasuki was determined that she would pray and pray to Ganesha until her father got a job. In their garden bloomed various flowers, but her favorites were marigolds and

roses. Plucking a basketful, she sat down in the garden and made a simple garland out of them. Before going to school, she went into the family's shrine, a large, beautifully decorated room with a big Ganesha statue on the altar. In the early morning light, the shrine glowed with freshness. She placed her garland around Ganesha's neck with deep reverence. A few incense sticks still added a whiff of fragrance to the air from the family's morning puja. She looked closely at Ganesha's statue, which shone with a bright black tone. Her eyes roamed over His tender feet and the crisp white cloth covering His stomach. Her gaze then rested on His peaceful face.

He was like a good friend to her. Closing her eyes, Vasuki said, "Dear Ganesha, as You know, my father has lost his job. He is so worried. I can't bear to see him like that. You are the only one who can change this. I pray to You to please, please help him get a new job. I promise to come to the shrine room every day with a garland for You that I will make with my own hands. I will do this until You find a new job for my father." The next three weeks seemed to go by in slow motion. Vasuki watched her father leave home in the mornings filled with hope and return in the evenings looking sad. Job hunting was hard work. He was visiting several companies every day and finding leads through friends and newspapers.

He had a simple rule of thumb for the hunt: "Talk to the person who has the authority to hire you if he wants to." It seemed obvious, but too many of his friends just went around handing in applications and chatting with the people at the front desk. They weren't making a strong enough impression to get an interview with someone who could hire them. But her father went into every office full of energy, determined to get an interview. He got the interviews, but none had resulted in a job. The stress began to show. Vasuki saw that look of worry on mom's face. Aparna was determined to remain at home to care for her children and her husband's parents. It would not be good for any of them if she had to leave home to work. For Vasuki, it seemed as though her whole life was about to fall apart.

Without talking about it to anyone, she worried, "What if we lose our house and I have to move? I would have to go to a different school! My friends would be gone...." But she found strength in her morning meetings with Ganesha, when she placed the garland around His neck and prayed fervently for His blessings. One day before leaving for school, she peeked into her parent's bedroom. Her father was sitting on the bed, pale and unshaven. His hands were folded in prayer. A tear rolled down his cheek. Moved to tears herself, Vasuki ran to the shrine, "Please, please, Ganesha, You have to help us. My father really needs a job." Suddenly, out of nowhere, Vasuki heard a voice, "At the right time and in the right way." Vasuki looked around to see who had spoken, but the room was empty. Everyone was in the kitchen. Startled, she realized that Ganesha had given her a message!

Everything was going to be alright. Vasuki smiled and went to school with a light heart. She continued her daily worship. When marigold season ended, she plucked the button roses for her garlands. Sometimes when she plucked the roses the thorns pricked her fingers. Once an ant bit her, but she smiled and went about her work with devotion and faith. January ended with the rains getting more forceful, and in February, the winds blew stronger. Just before she left for school on a Monday morning, exactly five weeks after she began her worship, she noticed that the shrine room looked brighter and more beautiful than usual. She placed her garland around Ganesha's neck and looked intently into His face.

For a second she felt as though He was watching her. She blinked her eyes and looked again. Yes! There was Ganesha looking at her. Then He smiled. Giddy with joy, Vasuki left the house

for school. Without a doubt, she knew that Ganesha was with her. That evening, as Aparna prepared dinner, Vasuki waited for her father to come home. Something in his approaching footsteps told Vasuki that he had good news. The box of chocolates in his hands and the smile on his face added to her happiness. Appa had gotten a job! As the family sat for dinner, Appa gave her a special smile, "Vasuki, your faith and worship has changed our karma." Vasuki blushed as she soaked in father's sweet words. Appa leaned forward, "Of course, Amma and I knew that the garland on Ganesha every day was for me to get a job. Seeing my little girl show so much dedication made me strong and persistent in my search.

Thank you! Did you know I was turned down 120 times? But the 121st was it! Ganesha found me a great job! It's more pay and more responsibility than the last one, even! Will you thank Him for me?" The next morning, Vasuki went to the shrine room and thanked Ganesha for the boon. Ever since then, whenever she had a problem, she prayed to the benevolent, elephant-faced Deity for help. And she never forgot the message she had gotten in the shrine that special day, "The right thing will happen, at the right time and in the right way." Vasuki had an encouraging thought at that moment: "It always does."

6. Treating Guests as God - Siddhanta Shravana, Scriptural Listening

Seyon declared loudly, "I'm bored!" "Me, too," replied Valli, his usually cheerful ten-year-old sister. "This silly rain, choosing to come during our school vacation! I can't go outside, and there is nothing to do inside!" "You have more to do than me! You have your puzzles and your dolls!" said Seyon. "You have your video games," shot back Valli. "Yes, but I don't have any new games, and I'm bored," he said. Amma watched the two of them complaining. "I have an idea," she said. "We will do a project together as a family, and we'll treat ourselves when it's finished!" "That sounds like fun! What's the project? Painting?" Valli asked excitedly. "Painting? That's lame!" Seyon smirked. Amma answered, "This is only for smart children.

You have to learn something by heart." "Like a poem?" asked Valli. "Not a whole poem, but several couplets." "What's a couplet?" "A couplet is a verse with two lines," replied Amma with a smile. Seyon perked up, "I like it. I can learn one of those in half a second." "There is a catch," Amma grinned. "There are 1,330 couplets. The project is to learn as many as possible as a family." "I don't think I like this game," Valli complained. "Seyon is going to learn more." The family avoided competitive games, but still the winners and losers spirit sometimes arose. "Now, now!" said Amma, "You will both do fine.

You can learn as many as you want. Here is a fair way we can manage the game. Each of you will be given one week to learn as many couplets as you can. At the end of the week, we will add up the number of couplets you have learned and we will convert that number into money, and..." She paused, then added with a smile, "Then we'll go out together and spend the money on a special dinner! How do you like that idea?" "It sounds great!" said Seyon, who loved outings. "Now where are these couplets?" "You have heard me talk about them many times. They are in the Tirukural, a book written by Saint Tiruvalluvar 2,000 years ago. It is the most popular Tamil classic of all times. As you know, the author gives wise advice on all sorts of subjects, including religion, farming, friendship, even how to manage an army." "What's the point in learning the verses by heart?" asked Valli.

"Nothing or everything!" replied Amma. "If you merely learn them by heart without understanding their meaning, it is nothing. However, it is everything if you memorize the words and truly understand the meaning. Then you will have gained a great treasure of knowledge." Seyon frowned. "A week to memorize 1,330 couplets?" "We are not trying to memorize them all right away!" Amma clarified. "Well, we certainly don't have anything else to do. We might as well start learning them," Seyon grumbled. Amma gave them each a hardbound copy of the Tirukural and returned to her housework. Seyon read the first verse in its English translation: "A is the first and source of all the letters. Even so is God Primordial the first and source of the entire world." He paged through the dictionary for primordial and read the meaning aloud: "existing from the beginning of time."

Amma came over and explained the verse, "The sound 'A' is the first sound in the Tamil alphabet, and all other sounds come out of it. Saint Valluvar is telling us that just as 'A' comes first, so does God. And just as the whole alphabet comes from 'A,' so does the whole world come from God." Seyon grinned and continued eagerly through chapter one. Soon he had memorized all ten verses in English. "Not so hard," he thought. Over the next week, the rains beat down without a break. Sheets of slate grey water pooled on the sidewalks. It was impossible to go out and play. With nothing else to do, the children spent hours and hours with their books. Valli struggled with the project.

The couplets were not simple or easy, and the rule was you had to understand them as well as memorize them. She slowly read through the first ten verses, though she couldn't really say she knew them by heart. But she started chapter two anyway. She smiled as she read its first verse, "It is rain that ruins, and it is rain again that raises up those it has ruined." "Well," she murmured, "Rain is certainly ruining our vacation time, but I don't see how it's going to raise anything up!" She ran to Amma, "What does this mean?" Amma said, "Oh, that's one of my favorites. Remember, we are talking about the old days when everyone farmed. Once in a great while, a heavy rain would flood all the fields and ruin the farmer's crops. But the flooding also left behind rich silt that made the fields more fertile.

And gentler rains would later nourish new crops. So, the farmer's crops were ruined by rain, but later the crops were made abundant again by rain. Rain was the key to feeding everyone in those days. That's the idea." "I get it!" Valli shouted. "I hope our rain will have a surprise for us!" The children continued studying and memorizing, and both looked forward to Sunday, when the game would end. They found the couplets interesting, and some even made them laugh. But Seyon and Valli weren't yet thinking how the verses might apply to their life, except for that one on rain and how it was ruining their vacation.

On Sunday morning, just as the family sat down for breakfast, the doorbell rang. Seyon ran and opened it. Though he knew it wasn't polite, he frowned. There was Aunt Hema, her two grown-up daughters with their husbands and two small babies. Seyon thought, "We don't need company now!" Amma rushed to the door, welcomed them inside and quickly prepared some breakfast for them. Valli and Seyon exchanged secret looks. "How could they come to visit this Sunday, the day we planned to celebrate!" Seyon wolfed down his breakfast and slinked to his room. Aunty began talking about Valli's singing progress and coaxed her to sing a song. Remembering her manners, Valli sang a short song for them, but her heart wasn't in it. As she finished, the phone rang in the kitchen. It was her friend Lakshmi.

She chatted with Lakshmi for fifteen minutes and then ran upstairs to her room. She flung open the door and, to her dismay, found Aunt Hema's family inside. "I... I... I'm sorry," she stuttered. Hema came to the door and said kindly, "We are sorry, dear, for using your room. The babies are tired and they needed a place to rest. We will be gone in a few hours." Valli gave a pretended smile and dashed into Seyon's room. Flinging her hair band down on his bed, she complained, "This is terrible. Not only do they come on a Sunday, now they take over my room!" Seyon ignored her and continued reading the Tirukural. After a moment he said, "Valli, remember the verse, 'The whole purpose of earning wealth and maintaining a home is to provide hospitality to guests.'

It is our duty to be good hosts. We should be thinking how to make our guests happy, not how troublesome it is to have them here." Valli calmed down and thought about her brother's words. "Yes, it is annoying to have visitors right now. But what if it were our family who had gone to visit relatives? How would we feel if our relatives were rude or unwelcoming to us?" Valli felt ashamed of her earlier thoughts. Suddenly one of the verses she had learned came to her mind, "The delicate anicham flower withers when merely smelled, but an unwelcome look is enough to wither a guest's heart." Had she made Aunty feel unwelcome? "Thank you, Seyon. I'm so glad we are learning Tirukural!" Valli said as she marched back to her room and knocked softly on the door.

As Aunty opened it, Valli asked, "May I come in for a second, Aunty?" "Of course, dear. This is your room." "No, Aunty. It is your room now. I am so glad you are here."

Saying that, Valli walked to her cupboard and opened it. Her dolls and teddy bears tumbled out. She picked out the two she liked most and put them on the bed, saying shyly, "Let the babies play with these." That evening, Amma explained how the children were memorizing Tirukural verses and Appa was donating a dollar for each one they could recite. Aunty and Uncle loved the game idea and added a dollar of their own for each verse. The children rattled off dozens of couplets. When stopped and asked what one or another meant, they gave a clear explanation.

They had each memorized fifty verses, for a total of \$200. They planned to spend it this evening on dinner out for everyone and a visit to the museum. As they all put on raincoats to go out, Aunty asked, "Valli, aren't you bothered that now you are sharing your prize with all of us, too?" "No, Aunty. The Tirukural says, 'When a guest is in the home, it is improper to hoard one's meal, even if it happens to be amrita, the nectar of immortality.' I'm so happy you are joining us." "My, my," replied Aunty, "haven't you become the wise child!" When they returned home, Valli and Seyon realized the evening was far more fun than expected. Treating their guests as God and sharing their outing was just the right thing to do. Valli realized that the rain really had brought an unexpected gift, a lesson in hospitality.

7. Understanding through Experience - Mati, Cognition

Jaykumar and Akhil were walking home after their weekly Hindu Basics class. They were excited that their familie's Guruji was teaching this month and felt fortunate to learn directly from this wise soul. It was a bright sunny morning and in the distance a few children were flying colorful kites. Akhil shouted, "Hey, let's go get our kites! We haven't flown them in a long time." When Jaykumar did not respond, Akhil repeated himself. Jaykumar looked blankly at Akhil and inquired, "Sorry, what was that you said?" Akhil smiled. "What's wrong with you? Don't tell me you're still thinking about our class?" Jaykumar scowled. "As a matter of fact, I was!" Akhil looked at Jaykumar's serious face.

Of the two, Jaykumar was the one who focused more during the class, while Akhil tended to daydream. "What did you find so interesting?" asked Akhil after a pause. "I was just wondering about the meaning of the seventh niyama, mati, cognition. The word cognition means 'understanding,' but that word took on so much additional significance in today's class. Didn't it to you?" "I don't know," responded Akhil. After a moment, Jaykumar asked, "If I tell you something I'm ashamed of, you won't think I'm a bad person, will you?" Akhil realized that Jaykumar had something really serious to share. He said, "Jaykumar, we are friends. Trust me. Spill it." "One day last week, I was walking back home when it started raining heavily, so I took cover in a doorway.

There, a five-dollar bill was lying on the ground. I picked it up and put it in my pocket. Then a man came by, searching the ground for something with a big frown on his face. I think he had dropped that money. I knew I should give it to him, but I kept quiet. I told myself that since I had found it, I could keep it. Was that wrong? It's not like I stole it, is it?" Without waiting for Akhil's reply, he muttered, "But I did keep the money." As Akhil wondered what to say, Jaykumar went on, "Two days ago, I brought \$20 to school to buy some books for class. I left the money in my duffle bag during lunchtime. When I came back, the money was gone!" "Twenty dollars! You must have been upset!" "Upset is putting it mildly. I was really mad! Who was the person who stole that money from me! I could not buy the books, and my parents were distraught.

Not only did I lose the money and not get the books that day, but now my parents also think I'm careless. Where is honesty in this world? Who would have guessed someone would steal the money? But then I thought of how I kept the \$5 and how maybe this was an example of karma." Akhil asked, "So what's all that got to do with today's class?" Jaykumar explained, "When Guruji talked about cognition today, it made sense to me. I saw how the two things were connected. I didn't just understand karma, I experienced it, just like one might find out that water is wet or that fire is hot." Akhil thought for a moment, then replied, "Yes, this is probably what is meant by cognition.

But now that you understand, what are you going to do about it?" "I plan to find the man and return the money to him. I have had sleepless nights thinking about what I did." Matching his action to his words, Jaykumar went to the bus stop at the same time he had the day before. He was happy to see the same man standing there, waiting for the bus. Jaykumar walked up to him and said, "Sir, did you lose some money here last week?" Surprised, the man responded, "Yes, I lost a five-dollar bill." Jaykumar reached into his pocket and handed over the money. Softly he said, "I should have asked you if you had lost it that day when I saw you searching for something. I am sorry."

The man gave Jaykumar a stern look and said, “You know, I really needed that money right then, and I wasted precious time going home to get more. I missed my bus, and I almost missed my appointment in town!” He softened when he saw that Jaykumar was truly apologetic. “But I’m glad you returned it. A five-dollar bill is light, but it can be so heavy when you carry it in your conscience. You were brave to admit to your action and make amends. You are a good boy. Be proud of yourself.” Jaykumar returned home with an empty pocket, but he had never felt happier in his life! His conscience, that small voice inside his head that chided him when he did something wrong, was now quiet.

A few days later, his teacher called him to her desk. Handing over an envelope, she said, “I believe this belongs to you. Someone put this envelope on my table. When I opened it, I found this \$20 and a little card with your name on it.” Jaykumar took the money and closed his eyes. Any remaining doubt about karma was washed out of his mind. As they were entering their Hindu Basics class the next week, Jaykumar told Akhil how the \$20 had come back to him. Akhil was deeply impressed, and he, too, came to see karma as a real spiritual law of the universe. During class Guruji asked, “Does anyone have a testimony to give? Has something special happened this week you would like to tell everyone about?” Jaykumar stood up and related the incident about the money.

Guruji said, “It is brave of you to tell this experience honestly. It reminds me of the story of a great sage who came to a village to meditate. He sat down under a tree and went into deep meditation. After a while, a gang of boys came by and, thinking it was fun, tossed pebbles at the sage, then ran away. The sage did not move. “Later that day, the sage came out of meditation. A villager who had seen the earlier event asked, ‘Swamiji, did you not notice the boys throwing stones at you?’ “Ah, yes, I did notice something,’ answered the sage, ‘I saw some boys throwing stones at themselves.’ “This sage,” Guruji explained, “had mastered mati, cognition.

He did not see the stone throwing as an attack against him. He only saw the consequences of the action upon the boys. The stone each boy threw hit himself in the future. You likewise saw that when you kept the money, you only stole from yourself. In the same way, if you tell a lie, someone else will lie to you in the future. If you hurt others, you will be hurt. If you love, you will be loved. Understanding these great spiritual laws is what is meant by mati, cognition.”

8. Taking Divine Vows - Vrata, Sacred Vows

Guhan and Meenakshi watched the festivities, the fun and frolic, with wide-open eyes. Anjali, their older cousin, was getting married, and the ceremony had just begun. Guhan looked at Meenakshi and said, "Sis, you look different in that fancy skirt and blouse." Meenakshi smiled. "Yes, I know. I love this mehendi and the glass bangles, too. They make me feel like a grown up!" "I wish my outfit made me feel like a grown-up!" whined Guhan, "This kurta is too tight and I'm afraid the dhoti will fall off at any moment." Meenakshi laughed, "That would be funny, wouldn't it?" "What?" asked Guhan in mock anger. "Yeah. The crowd would stop looking at the wedding and stare at you," joked Meenakshi.

The teasing had a touch of innocence, as the two children were only twelve and eleven years old. But it was fun. As they continued to chide each other, the musicians began playing their instruments. The royal sound of the nadaswaram horns merged with the rhythmic, pulsating beat of the tavil drums. The sound had an urgency to it, while it added a sense of richness to the event. The smell of jasmines, marigolds, lilies and other flowers mingled with the scent of the incense. In front of the musicians was the marriage pandal, where the bride and groom were seated. Two priests sat beside the fire. Cousin Anjali and her future husband, Dhiraj, sat facing the sacred fire. "Doesn't she look beautiful?" asked Meenakshi, staring at her cousin, who was dressed in a gorgeous red and gold sari and adorned in gold jewelry.

"Yes, but Dhiraj looks uncomfortable in his fancy suit. I hope Mother doesn't force me to wear one of those for my wedding. It looks so silly. I once saw a bride and groom with flowers hanging in front, covering their faces. Why was that?" "That is because in some traditions the bride and groom should not see each other's face till the wedding is over," replied Meenakshi, feeling proud to have known the reason. "And for your information, nobody forced Dhiraj to wear that outfit! He chose it himself. Anjali told me he couldn't wait to wear it. I think he looks handsome and majestic!" "I think our Hindu weddings are a bit much. Why should we spend so much and make such a fancy and expensive fuss? And all these rituals!! Look at that priest pouring ghee into the fire.

The smoke is making their eyes water." Meenakshi was quiet for a moment. While she didn't fully understand the wedding rituals, she knew in her heart that there was something larger than life happening here, something sacred and beautiful. It could be the fragrances, the flowers, the grandly dressed people, the music, it could be any of these or all of it put together. But whatever it was, it made the ceremony beautiful and precious. Suddenly the tempo rose as, under a shower of turmeric rice and flowers, the groom gently tied the yellow thread with the gold wedding pendant, called the mangala sutra, around the girl's neck. "There he goes.

Tied for life!" said Guhan. "Stop it. Don't be so cynical!" said Meenakshi angrily, "It's a wonderful thing to get married." Guhan laughed, and the two watched as the couple got up. With the groom in front, and the bride following him holding hands, they walked around the fire slowly. They circled the blaze seven times and then sat down. "I wish someone would explain this to me," said Meenakshi, just as her mother walked up to them. "Guhan, Meenakshi, are you enjoying the wedding?" "I love it! But this cynic here is criticizing it," complained Meenakshi. Guhan smiled, "I'm just having some fun. But really, this looks great. I mean a wedding like this is so earnest that I believe the two of them will carry this memory all their lives. It's so, so spiritual? I'm not sure that's the right word." Their mother beamed, "Yes our wedding ceremonies are very spiritual.

Every part of the ritual has a mystical meaning to it.” Meenakshi saw an opening: “Amma, can you explain the reason for the fire?” “Yes. Fire in Hinduism is sacred. By pledging in front of the fire, the couple are declaring their vows to Agni, the God of fire. They are voicing their commitment to stay together all through life. Agni is also the messenger God. He takes the news of the wedding to all the other Gods.” “Wow! That’s pretty serious,” said Guhan soberly. Mother agreed, “Yes, any vow is serious, isn’t it? Once you make a promise or take a vow before God, you commit to standing by it.

Have either of you made any commitments?” “I made commitments on April 14, Tamil New Year’s Day, which I promptly forgot,” confessed Guhan. “That happens. But if couples forgot about their marriage vows and didn’t stay together, what would happen to the family and children? It wouldn’t be funny, would it?” asked mother seriously. “Did you also go through this kind of a wedding, Amma?” asked Meenakshi. “Yes, dear. And though so many years have gone by, I can never forget the moment when your father tied the mangala sutra around my neck. Until then I had not realized what a big step in life it was to get married. I just thought that it is another small step in my life. It was at that moment that I realized that it is not a small step. It’s a big commitment, which requires respect, friendship, forgiveness and, most of all, love.” “Ma, why do the couple walk around the fire?” asked Guhan. “That also has meaning. Every time they go around the fire, they make a different vow in front of Agni. With the first round the couple vow together to earn a living and provide for their family.

They also promise to avoid any activities that might hurt their marriage. “On the second round they vow to build their physical, mental and spiritual powers, which will help them lead healthy lives. “The third vow is about material things. They will earn and increase their wealth, but only by righteous and proper means. “As they go round the fire the fourth time, they promise that they will acquire knowledge, happiness and harmony by mutual love, respect, understanding and faith. “The fifth round is taken to seek God’s blessings to have children. The couple makes a promise to take care of their God-given children in a responsible way, so that they grow up to be healthy, righteous and brave. “The sixth round is for self control and long life. “The seventh vow is to be loyal to each other and remain life-long companions in marriage.” “Gosh, I never knew there was so much meaning to that ritual,” said Guhan. “Amma, do you think it is necessary to take such vows? I mean, when a couple gets married, isn’t all this already understood?” “That’s a good question.

Yes, when two people decide to get married, all these things are understood in a general way. But if they are stated as a clear, formal vow, with God, family and friends as witnesses, then it creates a stronger commitment. Plus, difficulties can arise over time, and that is when they need to remember their promises to God and the Gods. “The marriage ceremony blesses the couple and gives them the strength to overcome any problems. Can you carry a heavy brick in a flimsy cloth? The cloth will tear, won’t it? But a cloth that is well woven with strong thread will be able to carry the weight. It is the same in marriage.

If it is built on a set of flimsy commitments, it will break down. In Hindu communities, a wedding is a lifetime commitment, not only towards each other, but towards society, their children, their extended family and God. By fulfilling this commitment, both husband and wife will grow spiritually and the community will prosper.” “Mother, all this deep talk is making me hungry!” said Meenakshi. “Then let’s join everyone for a delicious lunch,” said Amma with a grin as she led them to the reception hall.

9. The Power of Japa - Japa, Recitation

Chandran looked at the puja room door with its five bells attached to it and smiled. He was reminded of the many times he and his twin sister Chamundi had played with those bells as little children. They chimed the bells so much, that their mother often said to their father, "Thanks to Chandran and Chamundi, the house always has music playing." How old was he then? He must have been around six. Now, as a fifteen-year-old, he had grown away from all those small things which used to give him so much pleasure. Instinctively, he reached out and touched a bell.

As it swung softly, a lovely tinkling sound surrounded him. He rang another, and another, and in a few seconds his memory was flooded with events from long ago. He recalled how every day his mother would prepare food for the Gods and place it inside the puja room. He remembered how he and Chamundi rang the bells till Mother smiled and carried them out in her arms. And he thought back to how his father, every morning after a bath, would go and sit in the puja room. That was the only time of day they were forbidden to ring the bells, but they didn't mind because they could hear father chanting to the Gods.

The words were always the same and he repeated them continuously, but they had a charming melody and sweetness. Chandran's lips moved silently as he remembered the words, "Aum Namah Sivaya." Without thinking, he rang a bell again and peeped inside the puja room. There it was, Father's japa mala, on a tray on the table. As father repeated "Aum Namah Sivaya," his fingers would move slowly over the beads. He and Chamundi had asked why he sang only one song. And why did it have only three words? Father had smiled and said, "Children, this is not a song. Aum is a sacred sound. Namah means 'adoration.' Sivaya is Lord Siva's name." Chamundi then asked. "Appa, why is Aum sacred?" Picking Chamundi up and putting her on his lap, Appa said, "Aum is a very old mantra. It is said to be the first sound after creation.

You try saying it now. Do it like this. Aummm." Appa's deep voice started from the pit of his stomach and rose to his head as he chanted, "Aaa - uuu, mmmm." Chamundi repeated after him, but faster and at a higher pitch. Appa patted her on the head, "That was very good! Now, as I was saying, the meaning of my prayer is "Adoration to Lord Siva." Chandran recalled asking, "But why do you repeat it so many times?" "Any japa has to be ideally repeated 108 times, son. That is why my japa mala has 108 beads to guide me to repeat it that many times." "How did you learn all this, Appa?" "My Gurudeva taught it to me. He gave me my mantra initiation when I was 18 years old." "Can we also do the chant?" Appa looked at Chandran's soft baby face and said, "Of course, you can both do japa, but a little more simply than I do." After your bath, sit in the puja room.

Light the lamp and the incense, close your eyes and remember God. Then slowly repeat the word Aum, like I taught you, 108 times." Chandran and Chamundi were very happy. They felt grown up all of a sudden! Their father was teaching them something his Gurudeva had taught him! But still Chandran had a doubt. "Should we not chant Aum Namah Sivaya like you do?" Appa replied, "Not yet, because you have to be initiated by your Gurudeva to do so. It requires both study and dedication. I had to learn all the basic Saivite philosophy, live a certain way and promise to chant the mantra 108 times a day no matter what. It was a big commitment! When you two are 16, we will ask Gurudeva to prepare you for mantra initiation."

“That sounds like a lot of work! Why do we need to study and be initiated?” Chamundi asked. “It’s just three words!” “Because mantras have a good power that will help you in life, but the power only comes from the guru. That’s why. There is a story about this that I will tell you. “Long ago there was a king who demanded his guru to initiate him into chanting ‘Aum Namah Sivaya.’ The guru said he would, but only after two years of special study. “Now, this king was not at all patient, and he was very much used to getting his way.

He didn’t like the idea of waiting two years. ‘I will chant the mantra without initiation,’ he said to the guru. “That won’t work, Your Majesty,’ the guru replied, ‘May I show you why you should take the time to study and receive initiation?’ “Yes,’ replied the king, ‘but be quick about it.’ “Oh, it won’t take long,’ replied the guru who then turned to the guards, pointed at the king and said, ‘Arrest this man!’ The guards, of course, did not move. They just stared at the guru, wondering if he had lost his senses. Again the guru said, ‘Arrest this man! I order you!’ And still the guards did nothing. “The king lost his patience and shouted at the guards, ‘Arrest this man! Throw him in jail!’ The guards seized the guru and were about to haul him away.

“The guru then spoke softly, ‘But Your Majesty, wait, I am only doing what you asked, showing you that preparation and initiation are necessary.’ “How so?’ asked the king, puzzled with this strange behavior. “The guru replied, ‘I said the mantra “Arrest this man,” and nothing happened. But when you said it, look, I was quickly put in chains. That is because you have the authority to say that mantra, but I don’t.’ “I see,’ said the king. ‘Well, you have convinced me that it is worthwhile for me to study and receive initiation. But I wouldn’t recommend being so bold in the future!’” Appa then explained, “For you children, reciting just ‘Aum’ will be your mantra for now. When you are old enough, you can qualify for the initiation to chant ‘Aum Namah Sivaya.’

That will be a big step in your lives. Chamundi spoke up, “Can we still get japa malas now?” Appa replied, “Yes! I will buy you each one. Then you can start.” Now, as Chandran’s fingers played with the door and the bells on it, he remembered how every day for the next few years, he and his sister would prepare, go to the puja room and chant “Aum” 108 times. When he first did japa, his mind wandered here and there, to the playground, to the food offering in front of the picture and even to his school. But the more he practiced, the more his mind stopped roaming, and as he chanted a sense of happiness came over him. When he told his sister about it, she said, “Yes, I feel that way, too!”

She was actually more regular with her chanting than Chandran. He often skipped a day now and then, and by the time they were 14 years old, he had stopped doing japa. Chandran felt bad about that now. “Why did I stop? Studies, I guess, and not much time for anything else.” This last year had been especially difficult, and his grades had dropped. As he stood lost in thought outside the puja room, he felt a hand on his shoulder. Turning around, he saw his father smiling at him. “What are you doing, Chandran?” asked Appa. “Nothing, Appa. I was just remembering those days when I used to do japa and how happy I was.” He said this a bit sadly. “You have stopped doing your japa?” “Yes, I stopped last year, but I think I should start again.” Just then Chamundi came to the puja room.

She had heard the conversation from downstairs. She looked at Chandran, “Have you noticed that I am not as worried as you are?” “Yes, I have. Even though we take the same difficult courses in school, you always seem to be calm during the tests. Why is that?” Chamundi replied with a sisterly smile, “I think it’s because of my japa. I find myself much calmer afterwards. I can study better because I am not worried about anything.

Everything seems to be perfect in Siva's perfect universe. Sometimes I do japa several times a day. It only takes me five or six minutes to chant 'Aum' 108 times." Appa chimed in, "As you grow up, Chandran, your responsibilities will continue to increase. That is all the more reason for you to set aside some time for japa. It will give you strength. You may think you don't have time, but once you start it, you will feel more peaceful, and you will be able to accomplish a lot more. With better control of your mind, you will actually have more time, not less, because you will make fewer mistakes and better decisions." Chandran woke up early the next morning.

After his bath, he went to the puja room and sat down. In the early morning light the Gods' pictures glowed softly as though there was a secret energy behind them. Picking up the japa mala, he brought it to his eyes with reverence and then began chanting softly, "Aum." One hundred and eight times he chanted as his fingers kept track on the beads. When he reached the "guru bead" and realized he had finished one cycle, he slowly opened his eyes. Immediately he felt a sense of calmness and peace. Over the next few days, Chandran continued his morning japa. His mind grew more and more steady, and all the things that had worried him became easier to handle.

Coming downstairs one morning, he found Appa and Chamundi sitting in the kitchen. "Good morning," he greeted them warmly. "I have good news. Thanks to your encouragement, I have made up my mind to do my japa every day from now on. Plus, when I am 16, Appa, I will begin preparing for mantra diksha. I know that initiation will give my japa even more power to help me carry my responsibilities all through this life. Thank you both!" The two smiled proudly, and Chamundi served some tea.

10. Penance at a Cave in Malaysia - Tapas, Austerity

Arvind looked around him. The house had become like a temple over the last month as Thai Pusam approached. A divine aura seemed to surround the family. His mother and father, aunts and uncles all wore holy ash on their foreheads and were dressed in Hindu clothing. The house was filled with the smell of incense and jasmine flowers. Suddenly he remembered his cousin, and a shiver ran down his spine. Raj was going to do tapas this year by carrying a kavadi and being pierced with a small spear through his tongue. The very thought of it troubled him. Six years ago, when Arvind was seven, he had seen the long line of hundreds of kavadi carriers at Batu Caves in Kuala Lumpur, many with hooks and spears pierced through their skin.

As he entered the cave at the top of the stairs, one kavadi carrier especially caught his attention. His head was shaven and he had a wild look in his eyes as he danced to the beat of drums. After he received blessings at the small shrine to the God Murugan, the man sat down off to the side. Arvind watched as a priest removed the hooks and spears from his skin. Pale with fear, Arvind closed his eyes, imagining blood pouring out. But when he opened his eyes, there was no blood! The man stood up and walked to the shrine for worship as if nothing had happened. The episode left a deep impression on Arvind. Often he would remember the man with the spears, wonder at the pain he must have felt and marvel that there was no blood. Coming back to the present, Arvind wondered about his cousin Raj.

What had inspired him to take kavadi this year? Did he know what he was getting into? Arvind felt he knew better on this issue than his cousin did, even though Raj was his elder by three years. Sure, Raj had seen the kavadi carriers, but did he really know how much pain they must be going through? Maybe he should warn him. He ran through the house looking for him, then to the temple next door. He found Raj sitting at the temple peacefully reading about tapas from chapter 27 of the Tirukural. "Raj, I have to tell you this, you don't know what you are getting into with this kavadi thing. Don't do it! You don't know what it is!" Raj smiled and said, "What is it that you know about it that I don't?" "I have seen what the big kavadi carriers go through at Batu Caves.

It is no joke. Many of them go with huge hooks piercing their skin! It looked so scary, I almost fainted! You aren't going to do that, are you? I can't see why they would cause so much pain to themselves." Raj smiled and said, "Arvind, I've seen it, too, but I have done some wrong things this year. I have behaved badly at times, fighting and arguing with people. I know that all this has earned me some bad karma, and now I want to do penance to set things right again. It isn't just carrying kavadi on Thai Pusam day. For an entire month, I have eaten only one meal a day and slept on the floor in the building beside the temple. But to tell you the truth, I have never been more at peace than I am now. My thoughts are always on Lord Murugan. I feel that these physical hardships are setting the stage for some divine experience in my life.

Don't worry, I will be fine." As the day for the kavadi neared, Arvind felt sick with dread. He did not like violence, and he hated the thought of his cousin going through the pain. On the other hand, he was excited to have a second chance to witness a spiritual event which he was not able to fully understand the first time he saw it. That bright, early morning, the high limestone cliff with the cave home of Lord Murugan was reflecting the rising sun's rays. Arvind sat on the ground to watch the priests prepare Raj for kavadi.

Raj was dressed in a white veshti cloth, and around his neck hung several strands of sacred rudraksha beads. His body was marked with three stripes of vibhuti in dozens of places, and his forehead was adorned with a mark of yellow sandalwood paste and red powder between his eyes. He looked serene, and his body seemed to glow with a divine energy. As the priest completed the preparations, Raj breathed in deeply and shuddered as he went into a trance.

A half dozen friends gathered round to steady him as the priests began to quickly place small hooks into his back and chest. From each hook hung a green lime. The number quickly grew to 108. Then the priest pierced a silver spear through Raj's tongue. All the while Raj did not flinch or utter a sound. He was completely serene, as if in another world. "Sure, the piercing hurts," Raj had told Arvind the day before. "But you are in a different state of mind, one where the pain is a small thing and the determination to complete the tapas is the big thing. So don't you worry about me."

The group of friends now placed the kavadi on Raj's shoulders and strapped the support belt around his waist. The kavadi was a beautiful wood platform some ten feet high and eight feet wide built upon a shoulder harness. It was decorated with flowers and peacock feathers. Raj had been building it all week. Several small bells hung from the sides, adding their own uplifting tune to the occasion. With the kavadi firmly placed on his shoulders, Raj stood up. To the sound of a mighty drum beat, he began walking toward the cave temple of Lord Murugan. It was a slow process to cover the kilometer to the base of the cliff, and then climb the 286 steps to the top. Shouts of "Vel, Vel" and "Jai Murugan" pierced the air. Often the procession stopped, as there were hundreds of kavadi carriers making the march. Many had started before daybreak.

Hundreds of thousands of devotees were present to worship and witness the kavadi. The sun was high in the sky when Raj reached the huge golden Murugan statue standing 140 feet tall at the base of the steps. Arvind looked at the crowd and then at Raj. With his eyes half open, Raj seemed to be staring at a distant space as though his eyes could see something that none of them could. The expression on Raj's face was so divine and peaceful. Arvind had never seen that expression on anyone's face. Suddenly, Arvind felt a little jealous. What miracle was happening to Raj that he could smile so divinely in spite of the hardship he was experiencing? They reached the top of the stairs and entered the huge cave.

A thousand devotees, crowding in front of the small Murugan temple in the cave wall, made way for the kavadi carriers. Raj sat down on a stool near the temple. To the beating of the drum, a team of priests took the kavadi from his shoulders and removed the hooks from his body. Unlike when he saw kavadi as a child, this time Arvind did not flinch and turn away. He watched the entire event.

The concerns about the pain disappeared and he saw the act as a divine process. Now no longer in a trance, Raj took his milk offerings up to the shrine for Lord Murugan. With a final puja and blessings from the priest, his kavadi tapas was complete, his penance finished. Later that day, Arvind walked up to Raj and said anxiously, "You looked so radiant and serene. Can you please explain the whole thing to me? Even if one little needle pokes me, I yell. How could you bear 108 hooks being pierced in your body, the spear in your tongue and then slowly walk with it all for two hours to reach the temple a kilometer away? I don't understand!" Raj said, "Arvind, I am now so much at peace, I can't even begin to explain the feeling.

While the hooks were being placed on my body, I offered a bad deed from the months past to Lord Murugan with each hook. I felt His blessings showering on me as the pain of each hook settled one karmic score. You know, the Tirukural says that just as gold is purified by a blazing fire, so does the pain and suffering of tapas purify the soul. And remember, it wasn't just the day of Thai Pusam. I was also living a strict and simple life for a month beforehand, taking just one meal a day and sleeping on the floor." Suddenly everything made sense. Raj had felt the pain, even though he was in a divine trance, but he had been somehow beyond it! "And a true devotee is born," sighed Arvind loudly. His fears had vanished and were replaced with a sense of longing. He wished he could experience what Raj had gone through. "I shall do this myself next year!" he thought decisively as he walked back to his room, "at least with a small kavadi and a couple of hooks."