

## **The Three Principles**

*By Swami Chinmayananda*

To realize our full spiritual Nature is to experience the fullness of life. As long as we have not attained this state of being, our intellect will continue to suggest methods for overcoming feelings of imperfection, which manifest as desires. Desires are nothing but an expression of the ignorance of our real Nature. This ignorance has made us identify with body, mind and intellect, and is the cause of our egocentric life of pains and limitations. Therefore, there is no achievement more sacred and glorious than the realization of our true identity with the unlimited, eternal Self.

The purpose of religion is to eliminate ignorance through spiritual practices until the devotee comes to gain the light of wisdom. Ignorance, manifesting as desires on the mental plane, extend themselves as actions in the world. Therefore, spiritual masters advise that the most practical way of overcoming ignorance is through controlling our actions. They suggest that we first purify, and regulate these actions. All religions advocate qualities such as goodness, kindness, tolerance, mercy and selflessness. They insist on moral and ethical perfection as the fundamental condition for spiritual evolution. Without these qualities we will end up far short of the goal, even after a lifetime of devotion and worship.

Let us try to understand the scope of these moral and ethical values as explained in Hinduism. The three corner stones upon which the temple of Hinduism has been built are self-control, non-injury and truthfulness. The vast amount of spiritual literature in India is nothing but annotations, amplifications and commentaries upon these three principles. Ancient Indians planned their individual, communal and national life upon these three fundamental duties.

When these values are practiced they enable us to master our mind, which leads to mastery over ourselves, and the world around us. Although these principles are essentially the same in all religions, differences may appear due to the way in which they were presented to meet the needs of the people of the time. These three moral codes of behavior are: self-control (*brahmacharya*), non-injury (*ahimsa*), and truthfulness (*satyam*). They are the source of all values, and refer to the three layers of our personality: physical, emotional and intellectual.

### **Self Control**

The physical body longs for contact with the world of objects in order to gain sense gratification. The eyes wish to see beautiful forms and colors, the tongue craves good food, the nose likes to smell pleasant fragrances and so on. But when we continue to live only for the gratification of our sensual demands, passions multiply and ultimately consume us. To avoid such a condition, discipline (*brahmacharya*) at the physical level is prescribed. The meaning of the word *brahmacharya* has been so badly distorted that the real value of this discipline has been lost. *Brahmacharya* is an attitude of intelligent contact with the world. It does not mean a total denial of the sense enjoyments, but only insists on not overdoing anything. Thus to read, watch television, talk, or walk too much, or to eat a morsel more than necessary would be considered as breaking the vow of *brahmacharya*. When we live in self-control we discover in ourselves a renewed dynamism, and become pillars of strength in society. If this sacred doctrine is not followed, we abdicate our freedom and become slaves to the ever-changing circumstances of life. Thus, *brahmacharya* is a value to be lived at the physical level.

### **Non-Injury**

The second discipline, prescribed for the mental level, is non-injury (*ahimsa*). *Ahimsa* does not simply mean non-killing or non-injury at the physical level. It is to be understood as a mental attitude regarding our relationship with others. Non-injury is the spirit that should dominate the realm of our motives. Sometimes it is necessary that our actions be cruel although the underlying motive is totally loving and kind. Shakespeare beautifully expressed this idea in Hamlet, "I am cruel only to be kind." For example, a surgeon may outwardly appear to be cruel while performing an operation but is motive

is honorable. Such actions, though causing physical pain, would be considered as *ahimsa*. Non-injury is not a passive ineffectual attitude. Restraining the wicked to protect the good is the very creed of every true Hindu.

Thus, non-injury as advised by the architects of the Hindu culture is a value of life to be applied at the level of our motives. Our motives should be blessed and pure without any cruelty or hatred. In the execution of a pure motive, we may have to weed out the thorny shrubs to make the garden beautiful again.

### ***Truthfulness***

*Satyam* or truthfulness is the means to govern our inner world of mind and intellect. The outer world is a great university providing us with innumerable opportunities from which to learn. When these experiences have been well churned in our mind and the intellect has come to a firm decision, we must have the honesty and conviction to act upon it. When we do not make the full use of our mind and intellect, they lose their efficiency and we suffer as a result. Religion constantly reminds us to exercise our mind and intellect through its insistence upon the principle, "Be truthful to your previously gained wisdom."

Thus, truthfulness enjoins us to live according to our intellectual convictions. We all have ideals, but we often fall prey to our senses and compromise with them. This is dishonest living. Our dignity depends on our ability to live up to our convictions at all times.

The edifice of life stands on these three great principles. By following them we can integrate our personality and gain inner health. It is by this method alone that we can enjoy living in the world and develop the strength and courage to overcome all our problems in life.

When a person has learned to live in perfect self-control, ever vigilant to gather knowledge from life's experiences, practicing non-injury in his motives, and being truthful to his convictions, he becomes the chosen child of nature to be lifted to the top of the evolutionary ladder.

It is true, no doubt, that there are only a few in society who practice these great principles, but those few grow to such a stature that they lead the world with an irresistible spiritual power. It is these people of heroic personality, with integrated head and heart who will continue to guide humanity to new levels of spiritual evolution.