

VEDIC HOSPITALITY

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Abstract

The Vedas are those books of Indian Culture which have stored in themselves the knowledge related to all subjects like astrology, music, mathematics, science, religion, medicine, nature, astronomy, cosmogony etc. I have taken a drop from this ocean to explain the phrase 'Vedic Hospitality'. The Vedas define Hospitality is "a friendly and generous reception of guests or strangers." To be hospitable, therefore, means to care and show respect for another being. It is a sincere expression of appreciation, love, and humility. A person whose heart is filled with gratitude, magnanimity, and spirituality is naturally hospitable. I have quoted some points from Vedas, how hospitality is to be extended and what are the basic requirements for host and guest. Also I have mentioned some points about the differences between Vedic Hospitality and Modern Day Hospitality.

Introduction

The Vedas are without beginning. But the common Indian has not been able to grasp even a part of this collection of the deep secret due to his facing difficulty in understanding or intractability of the Vedas. If they are exposed to the Vedic culture at school and college level compulsorily, it will kindle in them a taste for acceptance and development of the Indian Culture. The Vedas are those books of Indian Culture which have stored in themselves the knowledge related to all subjects like astrology, music, mathematics, science, religion, medicine, nature, astronomy, cosmogony etc. I have taken a drop from this ocean to explain the phrase 'Vedic Hospitality'.

What are the Vedas?

In common parlance 'Veda' means 'Knowledge'. The knowledge is that light which destroys darkness of ignorance in the human mind. The Vedas are 'Apourusheya' or of non-human origin. 'Purusheya' is the work of man. Since it is not the work of man, the rishis who were human beings could not have written them. If they had been written them, the rishis would have been called 'Mantra Kartas' or the composers of the mantras. But in actual fact, they are called only 'Mantra Drishtas' or the seers of the mantras. This means that the rishis 'found' or discovered the Vedas and did not compose them or create them. The Vedas are called such a source of history which is infinite storehouse of legendary knowledge and science. Hence the Vedas are the backbone of Indian Culture.

What is Indian Culture?

Generally Culture is the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, defined by everything from language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts. The Indian culture often labeled as an amalgamation of several cultures, spans across the Indian subcontinent and has been influenced by a history that is several millennia old. Many elements of India's diverse cultures, such as Indian religions, yoga and Indian cuisine, have had a profound impact across the world.

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What is Hospitality?

The Vedas define Hospitality is “*a friendly and generous reception of guests or strangers.*” To be hospitable, therefore, means to care and show respect for another being. It is a sincere expression of appreciation, love, and humility. A person whose heart is filled with gratitude, magnanimity, and spirituality is naturally hospitable.

In India hospitality is based on the principle ‘*Atithi Devo Bhava*’, meaning “the guest is God”. Here, *Atithi* means “not scheduled” unexpected guest is considered a representative of the Supreme Lord, since his arriving unannounced is just what the Lord might do to test His devotee and see how ready he is to serve Him in any situation. With this understanding, we should afford the unexpected guest full hospitality. This principle is shown in a number of stories where a guest is revealed to be a god who rewards the provider of hospitality. From this stems the Indian practice of graciousness towards guests at home and in all social situations.

Modern Hospitality refers to the relationship between a guest and a host, wherein the host receives the guest with goodwill, including the reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers. It is important to note that hospitality is not the same as entertaining, which is, unfortunately, the more common approach today. When we entertain, we put all of our effort into the event—the appearance of the home, the rich, high-calorie/low-nutrient food and refreshments, and seating and table settings. We judge the success or failure of the event by such unimportant details as whether or not the soufflé fell or the ice ran out. In contrast, hospitality focuses on the comfort and well-being of guests; the desire to freely share one’s home; the nutritious, life-giving food that is prepared; and above all, the people.

Some hosts put so much energy into preparations for entertaining that they have little left for their guests. By the time the guests leave, the host is exhausted. Hospitality, on the other hand, is physically and spiritually refreshing and nourishing. Simply put, entertaining is fueled by pride, while genuine hospitality arises from humility.

Genuine hospitality does not distinguish based on species, race, caste, creed, or color; these differences are meaningless from a spiritual perspective. Rather, genuine hospitality welcomes all with a loving embrace. For an example of profound hospitality, one need not look any further than the example of King Rantideva of India’s Vedic tradition.

Rantideva is glorified, not only in human society but also in the society of the demigods (devas), for his exemplary tolerance, compassion, and selflessness. He never endeavored to earn anything. He would enjoy whatever he received by providence, but when guests came he would give them everything. Thus he, along with the members of his family, endured considerable suffering.

Indeed, he and his family members shivered for want of food and water, yet Rantideva always remained sober. Once, after fasting for forty-eight days, in the morning Rantideva received some water and some foodstuffs made with milk and ghee, but when he and his family were about to eat, a brahmana (priest) guest arrived.

Because Rantideva perceived the presence of the Supreme Godhead everywhere and in every living entity, he received the guest with faith and respect and gave him a share of the food. The brahmana guest ate his share and then went away.

Thereafter, having divided the remaining food with his relatives, Rantideva was just about to eat his own share when a field worker guest arrived. Seeing the field worker in relationship with the Supreme Personality of Godhead, King Rantideva gave him also a share of the food.

When that field worker went away, another guest arrived, surrounded by dogs, and said, “*O King, I and my company of dogs are very hungry. Please give us something to eat.*”

With great respect, King Rantideva offered the balance of the food to the dogs and the master of the dogs, who had come as guests. The King offered them all respect and obeisance.

Thereafter, only the drinking water remained, and there was only enough to satisfy one person, but when the King was just about to drink it, an outcaste appeared and said, “*O’ King, although I am low born, kindly give me some drinking water.*”

Aggrieved at hearing the pitiable words of the poor fatigued man, Maharaja Rantideva spoke the following nectarean words:

I do not pray to the Supreme Personality of Godhead for the eight perfections of mystic yoga, nor for salvation from repeated birth and death. I want only to stay among all the living entities and suffer all distresses on their behalf, so that they may be freed from suffering. By offering my water to maintain the life of this poor man, who is struggling to live, I have been freed from all hunger, thirst,

fatigue, trembling of the body, moroseness, distress, lamentation and illusion.

Having spoken thus, and although on the verge of death because of thirst, King Rantideva gave his own portion of water to that poor man without hesitation, for the King was naturally very kind and sober.

Suddenly, out of thin air, great demigods (devas) like Lord Brahma and Lord Siva, who can satisfy all materially ambitious men by giving them the rewards they desire, then manifested their own identities before King Rantideva, for it was they who had presented themselves as the brahmana, filed worker, poor man and so on. (Bhagavat Purana 9.21.2-15)

The great demigods had tested the King for his level of tolerance and compassion and the great King succeeded and thus received their blessings.

Vedas on Hospitality

All ancient scriptures teach that hospitality is a must between living beings. In books written only a hundred years ago, we find that well – to – do families gave shelter to less fortunate relatives or even strangers, who lived in their houses for many years, sometimes their entire lives. Travelers were welcome in every home and gladly taken care of.

There are four types of 'Ashrams' mentioned in Vedas. Ashram is that place where (a+shram) people come and work. The persons, living in home, the members of the family, do work, hard work. This is 'grihastha-ashram'. The word 'ashram' is used along with all the four ashrams. *Brahmacharya-ashram* is meant for intense work. *Vanaprastha ashram* is for complete tapas. *Sanyas ashram* is for severe tapas. *Grihastha-ashram* tops all four. All the other *ashramites* go to those *ashrams* from *Grihastha ashram*, and *Grihastha ashram* is their base.

Vedas provide guidelines for management of home (host). If these followed the host will be in the hearts of guests. A *Sukta* (verse) of *Atharva Veda* says "*Sunritavantah sta gharah.*" This means, "O householders! Be *sunritavan*. 'Sunritavantah' has 4 meanings: (1) Those who are making or keeping a good arrangement. (2) Those who get up at dawn. (3) Those who follow good rules and (4) Those who speak the truth.

Householders! Keep your house in order. There are three requirements of a good house arrangement.: (1) Cleanliness, (2) Keeping things at appropriate places, and (3) to arrange things in a beautiful manner.

Those who get up at dawn are also called *Sunritavan*. O Householders! Be *Ushavan* – Rise early. Those who wake up early become aglow and brilliant like the rays of the Sun. They always stay beautiful.

The third meaning of *Sunritavan* is *Maryadavantah*. Householders! Be the observers of discipline! The first part of the discipline of *grhastha* is: *Abhivadan, Pranam, Namaskrittt, Namaskar* – Salutation, bowing in respect. It should be the discipline in every family that the younger ones salute the elders in the family at night before sleep and in the morning when they rise. And the elders should bless them. Whoever come to our house should be welcomed with humility and salutation. When we meet somebody outside home, meet with a *namaskar* and part with a *namaskar*.

The second part of discipline is to obey others, to accept what others say. The younger ones should readily obey their elders.

The third part of *maryada* (limits) is discipline or *anushasan* which means to go according to rules.

The fourth part of discipline is toleration. Whereas the bearing of difficulties, strictness and severity is toleration.

The fifth part of discipline is service. One should have the spirit of serving others and to co-operate in the works of others.

The sixth part of discipline is *labour*. Everyone in the family should be laborious. – All members of the family should be hard-working.

The seventh part of discipline is love, affection. Members should have mutual affection and cordial feelings for one another. Differences should be resolved with affection and consideration.

The eighth part of discipline is respect, welcome.

The ninth part of discipline is civilized conduct.

The tenth part of discipline is sympathy. If someone is undergoing suffering or inconvenience in the family, others should sympathize with him and do something to relieve his suffering.

The eleventh part of discipline is good conduct. Inter-personal conduct of the members in the family should be polite and sweet.

The twelfth part of discipline is to understand each other well in the family.

These twelve points of observing discipline are important and their observance will give peace.

The fourth meaning of *sunritavantah* is to speak the truth and to speak sweet. O Householders! Be the speakers of sincere and true voice. Each one should address others with respect, good taste and peace. A sweet smile is the most attractive ornament while speaking. Sweetness and smile make the speaking of truth lustrous.

Welcoming the Guest

“Ghara, masmada bibhitan”

Guests are those who are scholars, men of good conduct, free from addiction, doing good to others, religious men, serving society, sadhus detached persons. When the guests come to the householder, he finds himself a bit burdened. If the householders express a feeling of indifference to the guests, then the guests should not walk away from there in anger, but they should rather say, “O householder! Do not fear us. We will not harm you. We will do you some good.

Vedas are very specific of what one has to provide for a guest. At the same time they describe what penalties one will bear for not respecting a stranger. For instance it is said that if a person is unfriendly and hostile towards someone in need of shelter, that person will end up on a lower level planet type. The specific punishment for that attitude to guests is the meeting with a kind of carrion -crows, which first gaze directly into that person’s eyes just as he or she used to look at strangers and then peck them out.

So Vedas highly recommended being kind to all fellow beings. There was a beautiful tradition which might sound strange to us: to wash guest’s feet.

Vedic tradition says that the first thing we should do for a guest is to give him food. Guest should be given the best food one have. It is sinful to give them poor meal or leftovers, saving better food for ourself. Vedas also describe the specific penalty such a host will be punished with.

If we do not have anything to eat, we should offer a glass of water. If we do not have even water we should at least provide a comfortable seat to sit in. If our circumstances are so limited that we do not even have a chair, we should at least throw a piece of cloth to the ground and ask our guest to sit down and have a rest. If we cannot afford even that much Vedas still have an answer. We should drop down to the ground, cry and complain that we are unlucky not being able to serve our guest properly.

Further, Vedas highly recommend not just seeing our guests to the door but walking them home. Genteel guest would stop the host and say:”Thank you very much. I’ll go by myself now. Please go back home.” In other case the guest should be taken all the way home. When they part the host should stand, wave his hand and sadly watch his guest go away.

It still works in India when the host stands sighing and continuously waving his hand. “Go back home please,”- the guest says. “No!” “Please, go.” “No.”

No One Should Go Hungry

“Is anybody hungry? Please come to my home, where my wife has prepared a meal. We have enough to feed 20 hungry men. She has prepared the finest rice, curry, and puris (fried bread). I will not take my meal until I know that every man, woman, and child is fed.”

Such selfless gestures of hospitality were common in the village life of ancient India. The religious householders of the Vedic times saw themselves as providers for all living beings, including the animals. No creature was allowed to go without food during the pinnacle of Vedic civilization. This is the fertile ground in which the seeds of Food for Life’s philosophy were sown.

In every culture, there’s an etiquette for receiving guests, but probably nowhere was this etiquette more developed than in the Vedic culture that flourished in India fifty centuries ago.

The Vedic tradition trained householders to see all living beings as part and parcel of the Supreme Lord. Thus, Vedic householders felt themselves responsible for giving shelter and comfort not only to their immediate family but to Lord’s family everyone. The Vedic injunction is that even if an enemy comes to our home, we should receive him so well he does not apprehend any danger. This training helped the householder become broad-minded, seeing every living being in relation to Almighty.

When Lord *Krsna* was present on earth, He personally showed the example of hospitality.

The *Srimad-Bhagavatam* relates how Lord *Krsna* welcomed His devotee *Akrura* word by word. Lord *Krsna*, who is very kind to His devotees, embraced *Akrura*. Taking him by the hand, *Krsna* brought him to His sitting room, where He offered him a very nice sitting place and water for washing his feet. He also worshiped him with suitable presentations of honey and other ingredients. When *Akrura* was thus comfortably seated, *Krsna* brought very palatable dishes, and *Akrura* accepted them. When *Akrura* finished eating, the Lord gave him spices as well as pulp of sandalwood, just to make him more pleased and comfortable. The Vedic system of receiving a guest was thus completely observed by Lord *Krsna*.

Conclusion

Although the India of Vedic days has gradually disappeared, a vestige of Vedic hospitality remains till now. According to the Vedic tradition, the host is greatly benefited by receiving saintly persons.

However old – fashioned it sounds, just imagining that such attitude is possible and still practiced makes me feel warm inside and long for less “civilization” in our society. Hence, our goal should be to treat people so nicely that they will come back again and again.

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