

Revolutionary Cleanliness

by Urmila Devi Dasi

THOSE WEEKLY girl scout meetings always began with us reciting our vows. "To be clean in thought, word, and deed," I would say carelessly, eager to begin our project or camping excursion.

For children being raised in Krsna consciousness, cleanliness isn't an abstract ideal but an important part of a progressive spiritual life. Though spiritual purity is the first concern, physical and mental cleanliness also count. In fact, they are usually symptoms of one's consciousness, and a clean body and mind help develop a clean consciousness, or Krsna consciousness.

Clean Body, Mind, Intelligence

We should teach our children that cleanliness is essential for good health. Most parents teach their children some hygiene, but devotee children do things that require special cleanliness, such as visiting the temple, eating *krsna-prasadam*, or preparing food to offer to Krsna.

For mental cleanliness, or mental purity, our children should learn how to avoid envious, hateful, deceitful, and selfish thoughts. They need to know how to deal with such thoughts, which enter the mind despite all precautions. We must also teach children to guard against mental speculation, by teaching them that philosophical and spiritual truths must be supported by Vedic literature. And since thoughts and words are closely related, our children should practice pleasing, helpful, and truthful speech.

As for purity of intelligence, we want our children to learn to use their intelligence to help themselves and others make spiritual progress, rather than to increase material illusion.

The ultimate purity is unadulterated love for Krsna, free from personal desire and flowing unhindered like a mighty river to the sea. If our children gain such cleanliness of soul, their cleanliness will be revolutionary.

Teaching Cleanliness

The two best ways to teach our children any kind of cleanliness are by our own example and by helping them form early habits. For example, the longer we wait to teach our children to wash their hands and mouth after eating, the longer they have to form a habit of uncleanness. No matter what we do, they will form habits—clean or unclean. So we should start teaching about cleanliness as soon as they can understand.

When we help our child start a habit early, the child comes to see the behavior or attitude as normal, as simply part of life. To get the child to practice cleanliness will then be fairly easy. For example, if we bathe our child every morning from a young age, the child will naturally pick up the habit of early-morning bathing.

When to introduce a particular item of cleanliness depends on the age and needs of the child. An overall guideline is that the child must be physically and mentally capable of the cleanliness routine. For example, until a child gets all his baby teeth, teaching him not to put his hand in his mouth is unreasonable. But we can teach even a young child to wash after eating, simply by always washing the child's hands and mouth after meals. Gradually, the child can do this without our assistance.

Children of two or three can start learning to keep their personal environment clean and organized. Parents can help put things away and clean up inevitable messes. A four-year-old can have regular cleaning duties, though these should be easy and take little time. By the time a child is ten, he or she should be naturally clean and organized.

Here's how I teach a child of eight to clean and organize his or her room. First, we put everything away neatly in its place. Not having too much clutter makes the job easier. If clothes, books, or toys are not stored neatly, the child has to keep at it until the area "passes inspection." Then the child and I clean the surfaces, as the child learns which rag and cleaner to use on each surface. I teach the child to clean every surface regularly, including small ledges on walls, doors, and windows. We then look for dirt. Are there smudges around the light switches or door knobs? Has the ceiling been collecting cobwebs? Finally, we sweep and mop the floor together.

A child will gradually be able to do more and more cleaning without my assistance, although someone experienced in cleaning must always inspect, and sometimes re-inspect, before the cleaning is finished.

Besides the daily routine, to have one or two designated days a week for full-scale cleaning is helpful. In our household, cleaning on such days is a family festival, where we play tapes of lively devotional music and clean with great enthusiasm.

Children should learn that the home isn't the only place to keep clean. We should teach our children that a brahminical person leaves a place cleaner than he found it. We can practice applying this principle with our children when eating at highway picnic areas, or when staying overnight in temples, hotels, or friends' houses.

Our children also need to learn the reasons behind the different items of cleanliness. Otherwise, rules will seem just that—simply rules, ritualized formulas developed traditionally for reasons that no longer apply or never did.

Protecting Purity

Parents can nurture the mental, intellectual, and spiritual purity of a very young child simply by controlling what he or she is exposed to. But a growing child gradually meets with influences beyond the family, and even beyond the community of friends and relatives. Children who come with us shopping, preaching, and on other excursions into society at large, as they should, will confront an increasingly impure world. How important, then, that we show a joyful strictness as we clean our homes, bodies, words, minds, and hearts as an offering of love to Krsna. As the child imitates adult standards of cleanliness and purity, he or she will find such happiness in

Krsna consciousness that there will seem no greater gain. Impure thoughts and actions will then be seen as what they are—dirty and disgusting.

Children clean in body, mind, intelligence, and soul can become real *brahmanas*. Even a small number of people who have achieved purity in their childhood can transform society.

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