

HOW TO HAVE YOUR CAKE AND EAT IT TOO

[This article written by Silloo Mehta (U.S.A.) has been taken from Spring 2003 issue of the Mazdeyasni Connection and is relevant even to the Parsees of India. At this time of moral bankruptcy, the down to earth, practical, wise and workable words of wisdom can do wonders to uplift our sinking society and shake it out of its slumber. - Editor]

Let's face it. Life for most of us has been very successful in the New World, but haven't we at one time or another, (when disappointed with our children), felt like saying "What are we doing here?" Aren't our kids missing something very essential in their training for life as future Zoroastrians? We all wish our offspring would grow up as good Zoroastrians and remain so all their lives. But then we push aside this thought as something impossible. Living in this part of the world, away from Zoroastrian influence, in the absence of a place of worship, how can we expect this? Most of us think this is impossible and many of us give up even before trying.

It is with those parents, and the parents whose children are yet very young and impressionable, that I wish to share some lessons that I have learned the hard way, through toil and tears; so that mistakes are not repeated and many will be spared the agony of "losing" their sons and daughters to a Society – in which false standards predominate the human minds, in which a free-wheeling generation casts off old restraints and where the distinctions between right and wrong not only change but blur and disappear.

I do not profess to know it all for I may have failed often, but then I have learned. After a deep study, careful consideration and practical experience of the problems that confront us, I dare to point out the oasis in the desert, for the benefit of confused and helpless parents. With constant efforts, sacrifices and changes in our attitudes and lifestyles we can attain what seems to be impossible. The question is: how willing are we to pay the exorbitant price for earning this valued prize? How conditioned are we to take up this Herculean challenge? How anxious and concerned are we for our

Religion, the future of our children and the future of our community?

Now, if you are prepared to consider my suggestions, please read on and ponder.....

The major factors involved in bringing up a Zoroastrian child in the Western World are:

1) KNOW YOUR RELIGION AND HAVE FAITH IN (ACCEPT) YOUR RELIGIOUS PRINCIPLES.

Zoroastrianism is not just a Religion. It is a way of life.

It is time we took a long hard look at ourselves and what we are doing to our Religion. Our attitudes have changed dramatically since we have come here, to this part of the world. We have started to frown upon our age-old practices, we question and doubt and argue over the great spiritual ideas underlying our tenets just because they are beyond our understanding. In short we have taken the beautiful flower of our religion and pulled it to bits, by dissection, arguments and experiments.

So the very first step is to study the Religion deeply and thoroughly, or have full faith in the teachings of our beloved Prophet. No doubt, it is very difficult in this age and country (even in India) to observe even 1/3 of the tenets of Religion in everyday life or to profess Zoroastrianism as it should be. But religious principles are for all times, all places, and it lies in the hands of the few careful, anxious, staunch followers of the faith to adapt their circumstances to make them converge towards the principles of their Daena. Even if we cannot observe and practice, it is very important to know the dictates – the Ideals. The whole object of our life consists in our incessant attempts to adapt ourselves to the Ideal and

to ultimately reach the same. It is therefore the duty of every Zoroastrian mother to hold up these ideals and constantly try to instill these in her children and thus bless them.

In the older days, people were not perfect, but they did not have serious problems as we do now... there was no question of disregarding the Laws of Religion. Today these laws are under attack. We not only make our own deductions but we set up our own structures of morality. Do we profess to know more than the Divine Being (The Messenger) who brought the message from Almighty God?

It is a grave mistake on the part of some who try to twist and turn our principles to suit their lifestyle. If we are graduates of modern universities, it is ridiculous to profess we are masters of all branches of knowledge and then evaluate the doctrines and principles of Religion with the yardstick of logic and learning. If we move about bare-headed, it does not follow that Asho Zarathustra had not enjoined us to cover our heads. If observing the menstrual practices is impossible now, it does not follow that women should keep polluting anything and everything if they can help it. If some consider wearing Sudreh-Kushti as a nuisance, it does not mean that we did not make a covenant at the time of our Navjote with Asho Zarathustra to wear it all our lives. It is very necessary to place before our children the ideal teachings of Zoroastrianism, and teach them to try to observe as much as they can and then pass some sincere thoughts of repentance for things we cannot do. "O, Holy Zarathustra, I am thankful for your laws and commandments which I believe are good for me, but I can observe only so much. Do give me better circumstances so I may progress further and further in my spiritual journey during this sojourn on earth". Your attitude will be observed by your children and your enthusiasm and faith will be contagious.

Once you do this, there will be no cry for changes. Once we can envisage our goal, we could work our way slowly and steadily toward it. Once there is a beginning, many will follow

to produce a younger generation of staunch and faithful followers. Heard of the "domino effect"?

It pains me to observe that many of us are ashamed of our language, our dress, our eating habits, the food we eat and so on. Our children do not speak or understand Gujarati, they are embarrassed if the mother wears a sari, and prefer hamburgers and other junk food to Dal and Patia! What is wrong with our ways? What makes one think the Western ways are superior? Why are we disowning our heritage and chasing what others wish to discard? Does the country force us to change? Will our American friends lower us in their esteem if we be and act ourselves? Is there any law which forbids us to wear our sudreh kushti or to say our prayers in Avesta? America is a great country – a land of opportunities not only in the materialistic sense, but also in spiritual experiences. It depends upon what and where you are seeking. Here, one can choose one's lifestyle and one's friends. We have resources, facilities, freedom and access to all kinds of knowledge. What we cannot have, we can create. An average American is open, frank, honest, appreciative, searching for answers and never ridicules things he cannot understand. If we manage to stay away from all the negative elements of the permissive society, if we are strong in our convictions and are unaffected by peer pressure, we have no reason to worry!

2) EXPLAIN SPIRITUALITY AND PURPOSE OF LIFE

"A remarkable change is taking place in the intellectual climate of our time. The holistic world view is penetrating our consciousness and superseding the rational materialism," says Sir George Trevelyan.

We need to explain to our children that we as human beings are intimately and inextricably part of the whole of Nature. We are free spiritual beings and belong to the Spiritual World. We are sojourning on earth of gravity only for a brief period, of education and experience. Sir George Trevelyan, in one of his

books, compares the body to a diving suit. When a diver wishes to explore the ocean floor, he has to don a special suit, be held down by leaden boots and look through his visor. Similarly the spiritual being (Man) descends from a subtler plane to assume a body (which is discarded when worn out) for earthly experiences and to overcome his lower self.

The diver may become so absorbed by those marvels under water, that he forgets, for a time, the two tubes which, by providing him with oxygen, keep him alive and link him with the world on earth. Similarly if we, like undersea divers, remove our helmets (cast off our spirituality) we lose our link with the spiritual world to which we must return. Like divers, we become so entangled and absorbed in what lies underneath, (materialistic morass) that we forget which world we belong to.

It is vital that we realize this and provide sound spiritual guidance, and train our children not only physically and mentally but train them for Life... guide them in the spiritual aspects of life, things that determine our values, ethics and morals, and prepare them for the afterlife.

3) BOTH PARENTS MUST HAVE SIMILAR ATTITUDES AND SHARE THE SAME GOAL

The husband and wife relationship which believes and practices the concept of ONENESS is the most basic, enduring and important of all human society. Parents should feel as one, commit as one, communicate as one and teach as one. Unless both of them agree and have a definite code of behaviour for their children, there will be confusion in the minds of the kids, and a tendency to disobey.

Although both are required to work as a team, we must not mix up their complementary roles. Mothers must be mothers and fathers must be fathers. Ideally, the woman's role is working together with her husband and giving time and attention to the children at home.

The father too has lots of responsibilities and duties in child rearing, besides those of

earning the bread. Do they both have a burning desire to accept this great challenge for the sake of their children?

4) BRING BACK OLD VALUES

"Parsee, thy name is Charity" is a very common phrase and our forefathers really earned their charitable reputation. Even today we are proud possessors of this great quality, to some extent. But "Charity begins at home". So we have to look to the needs of our community first and then help the others. Our ancestors built schools, colleges, hospitals and several other charitable institutions even for non-Zoroastrians. But then there was not a single Parsee beggar at that time. Our community was self-sufficient. Now there are quite a number of very poor Parsees in Bombay and in the villages of India. When on a visit to India it would be a good idea to take the children to see them – to help them to ignite the community feeling and a oneness with our less fortunate brethren. Encourage the children to set aside a small amount from their pocket money for charitable purposes. This will water the seeds of CHARITY that are already ingrained in them.

There was a time when virtues like OBEDIENCE, RESPECT FOR AUTHORITY, PARENTS AND ELDERS were instilled into the child, right from his early years. Now these are "half and half"! Disobedience and rebellion are the root causes of Man's misery. We tolerate this fault in our children and keep tolerating till it grows into a moral disease – Permissiveness. If a child is allowed to have his way most of the time he will not have opportunities to practise SELF-CONTROL. He wants what he wants, at any cost. If he cannot, he may use any means or go to any extremes... I am talking about the present American child-rearing system, as I have had several years of experience as the director of pre-schools. Zoroastrian children may not fit into this picture but are we not trying to "In Rome, do as the Romans do"? Are we not moving in the direction of doing the "in thing to do"? And what about our third or the fourth generation? If we do not watch out now and

turn back to our good old ways, can we guarantee the quality of our great-grandchildren?

We also need to emphasize and teach that "CONTENTMENT is natural wealth" in today's society – a society which reduces values to crude numerals in dollars!

Attainment of wealth or eminence is not the only measure of success. These are fine and even necessary – if the price paid is not too high or achieved at the expense of one's family duties or religious principles. Quite a number of Parsee ladies (not girls any more) are unmarried because they cannot find males who can match their financial expectations. MODESTY and HUMILITY – be it in dress, behaviour, disposition, manners, are somewhat absent in those who are born and brought up here. This is reflected in some of our young speakers in youth congresses who are encouraged to speak on religious subjects without knowing the basics of our religion, leave aside practising it. It is very sad that they doubt and question our old customs and religious disciplines and practices which have helped our religion to survive.

TRUTHFULNESS is the most important virtue we need to instill in our children. The early Iranian Zoroastrians taught this as the very first lesson to their kids from a very early age and enforced this discipline till it became a habit. We can best teach truth telling by way of examples and not try to clothe untruth in "diplomacy", "tact", "as long as it doesn't hurt", etc. There is no such thing as a "white lie".

CHASTITY AND SHYNESS have become old-fashioned and outdated. Blame and guilt have become irrational. Moral principles are changing. There is always an excuse or a justification for every wrong action so instead of hearing about wrong or right today, we hear about 'right and repressed' or 'right and not mentally healthy' or 'right and liberated'. What used to be 'self-indulgence' is now 'self-fulfillment'. What we used to call 'living in sin' is now 'a meaningful relationship'. What was once 'discipline' is now 'unhealthy repression'.

This is an observation of the present day American Society given by an American himself. We need not wear the cap, but surely each of us has to pause a while and watch ourselves pass by and ask "How much of all this is coming into my life, affecting my family"?

Deep in our hearts, we may know all this but we brush it aside as "Times are changing – we can't help it". BUT WE CAN! Most of us give up even before trying. If we are disappointed with our children, we wonder what went wrong. How did that happen? The answer is PERMISSIVENESS – collective permissiveness – to a greater or lesser degree – and trying to keep up with the Joneses (not only in the material sense) and now trying to keep with the Billimorias or the Dasturs or the Iranis! Yes our own people.

5) POSITIVE PARENTING

Parents would do well to teach constantly the standards given in God's revealed Word with love and understanding and then maintain them by correction if necessary. This is better said than done. It takes a lot of time, effort, and sacrifice on our part; even if the price you pay is very high, just visualize the prize!

CREATE A POSITIVE ZOROASTRIAN ENVIRONMENT: Like what? If you ask me, I shall dream... of a Zoroastrian household. The early hours of Dawn breaking into another day – the uplifting scent of sandalwood and loban ... Avesta chanting echoes in the rooms, ... the clank of the pots and pans in the kitchen ... the ever burning fire crackling in the hearth, the aroma of the home-cooked, wholesome food... family members sitting together at meal times breaking bread with the name of the Lord on their lips ... Children calm and collected... women ever in service of their husbands and children, moving around the house, heads covered... always there when needed... spotlessly clean house... "Chok and toran" at the doorstep... Zarathushtra's picture in every room and also those of the dear departed... Of course, this is only "airy idealism", but here are a few suggestions:

- (A) Keep our calendar in view (in English) and every morning announce what “roj” it is. Teach what “unrojas” are (Bahman, Mohor, Gosh, and Ram), what “Hamkaras” are (Hormuzd, Ardibehest, Adar, Sarosh, and Behram). Mark the Gahambars, Zarathoshtno Deeso, Kooka daru’s baj, the Parabs and other such events. Remember to pray for our dear ones who have passed on, on their “roj”. Talk and discuss about Ameshaspands, Yazads, Dae, Mino, Farrokh, Farvardin.
- (B) Introduce gradually the performance of kushti rituals at least morning and night if not in every gah or after visiting the bathroom. Then motivate them to pray from the English Khordeh Avesta. Explain and discuss the translation and the meaning of the Prayers.
- (C) Set aside a time in the evenings for a discussion and explanation period. Listen to religious cassettes. Teach Gujarati. Have question-answer sessions. Give an opportunity to voice their grievances. Set up a quiz or a puzzle or a contest occasionally and top it off with small rewards. Train them to influence their Zoroastrian friends. Give examples from our history and constantly talk about our glorious age-of the past in India and in Iran.
- (D) Have a little corner in the house as a place of worship – an ever-burning “deevo”. Give them duties to clean, etc. Let them develop a habit of covering their heads, at least at meal time/visiting the bathroom.
- (E) Take your child’s help to keep the house clean. Teach girls household duties and cooking.
- (F) Avoid eating out. As far as possible consume simple wholesome homemade food. This is

very important because the thought vibrations of the person who cooks are caught in the food we eat.

- (G) Insist on children washing hands at least, if cannot do Kushti after visiting the bathroom. Pray 5 Yatha, 3 Ashem if cannot “do” kushti.
- (H) Continue all the customs and practices, we used to do in India.
- (I) Observe the laws of purity—as much as you can.
- (J) Familiarize the kids with our sacred books and Shanameh characters.
- (K) Speak in Gujarati. Make a beginning. Teach them to read and write if they would like to learn.

SET LIMITS – BE KIND BUT FIRM – AVOID EXPOSURE TO NON-ZOROASTRIAN PRACTICES AND CONCEPTS. TEACH THEM TO BE TRUE TO OUR SOUND RELIGIOUS CONVICTIONS AND NOT YIELD TO PEER PRESSURE – DO THEM A GOOD TURN.

The word “training” includes the concept of discipline – warm, loving parenting accompanied by restrictions. Do not for a moment nurture any feeling of “guilt” in doing so. You are the parent and you have every right to guide your child’s footsteps. This is your moral duty.

“...bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord”, “Train up a child in the way he should go, and even when he is old, he will not depart from it”..... “he who loves him, disciplines him promptly.”

It is time we turn our attention to many many such similar quotations from the scriptures – not only from the Bible, but also from other such sacred revelations and heed them. These principles have been proven for thousands of years. If they have stood the test of time, why should you think they will not work now?

Good Luck!