

"Do You Force Your Children?"

by Urmila Devi Dasi

WE SIT IN THE Calcutta Airport waiting for an announcement, the flight three hours late. The many ceiling fans do little to refresh the air, polluted by cigarette smoke and hundreds of bodies. My ten-year-old son and I sit by a door, opened a crack but with negligible effect. I talk with a blue-saried nun from Puna who wishes us the best in our spiritual journey. Then I talk with a couple who supervise testing for students seeking admission to European and American schools.

Then, from an Indian gentleman, the inevitable questions.

"Is this your son?"

"Yes, and we have a seventeen-year-old son and a thirteen-year-old daughter."

"Are they also practicing Hare Krsna?"

"Oh, yes."

"Do you force them?"

I take one of the last drinks from my bottle of mineral water and lean forward.

Force. Everyone wants to know if we force. The devotees at our project in Mayapur discussed this with me at length, and here it is again. Our three children certainly do not feel forced. Yet we expect, and to some degree require, their active and willing participation in our spiritual life, especially the chanting of the Hare Krsna *mantra*. But how can one require willing participation? I've explained it countless times, and again I beg the Lord to give me intelligence and the ability to ignore the second-hand tobacco smoke.

"I don't like the word *force*," I say at last. "Don't parents 'force' their children to brush their teeth and wear clean clothes? Yet neither parents nor children generally see this as force. Why?"

"Well, we try to explain the reasons."

"Yes, and we set an example."

"And habit?"

"Yes, we try to develop spiritual habits in the children. Of course, spiritual life and a love for Krsna's name are natural for the soul, so these things are not externally imposed by habit. But developing habits in children brings them to take as natural what is actually natural."

"Like—you wake up early, right?"

"Yes, three-thirty. So to our children that's simply a normal time to wake up. They see six o'clock as late. In the same way, a normal person likes clean air and clean lungs. Not like this room."

We both lean back, and my son Kesava continues to chant on his beads.

"Mata," he asks me, "I want to see if I can leave this area and walk around the airport."

"Sure."

I turn to the gentleman. "It may sometimes appear that we demand things of the children, but the point is to awaken their natural attraction for Krsna. It's like training children to brush their teeth regularly so they'll come to feel uncomfortable with an unclean mouth."

My acquaintance is satisfied and turns to his newspaper.

Just how do we instill in our children love for spiritual life? First, we should surround them with spiritual activities, especially the chanting of the Hare Krsna *mantra*, and protect them from all opportunities to grow fond of the modes of passion and ignorance. These precautions won't narrow children. Doing these things is as reasonable as surrounding children with a clean house and getting rid of dirt from clothes, floors, and furniture. Letting children live with dirt won't broaden them.

We sit our children by us when we chant, and we expect them to chant too, just as we put clean clothes in their drawers and expect them to wear them. We teach our children the Hare Krsna *mantra*, show them how to finger the beads and play musical instruments, and guide them daily, as much as we check every day to see if they're dressed for the weather or have finished their chores.

It's easy to understand how to teach the mechanical, external aspects, but is it even possible to teach the internal, the feelings?

Just by teaching the externals, of course, we give a powerful yet subtle message: "This is important." For example, when a mother, during her *japa* chanting time, always insists that her young child play quietly, the child realizes the seriousness with which his mother approaches her chanting. So the child will naturally imitate.

Beyond that, one can set the example of a deep commitment to spiritual perfection throughout one's life. The children should see that this is a joyful commitment, free from hypocrisy and self-righteousness. The children need to be inspired by regularly hearing the philosophy of Krsna consciousness. And, finally, we can pray to Krsna, who is in the heart of our children, to reveal His glories to them.

With this program and the mercy of Lord Krsna, as our children mature they will voluntarily choose to work for the ultimate treasure, love of God.

Urmila Devi Dasi became a disciple of Srila Prabhupada in 1973. She has been involved in ISKCON education for the last seven years, primarily as the principal of the Detroit gurukula. She recently moved with her husband and their three children to the ISKCON community in Hillsborough, North Carolina, where she is working to establish a model of spiritual education.