

Attaining Goals through Vedic Education:

Implications for the Brahmin Community

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The title of this session contains two phrases: "Attaining Goals" and "Vedic Education." Both deserve careful examination. Before we can speak about attaining any goal, we must first be clear about which goals we are speaking of. And before we can speak about Vedic education, we must be honest about the state it is in today. Let us take each in turn.

Active Goals and Shadow Goals

When we ask people today — youngsters, middle-aged, anyone — "What is your goal in life?", the answers are remarkably consistent. I want to study at a good institution, get a good degree, and find a good job. I want security in life, a happy family, and a good life partner. I want to be a top professional, an entrepreneur, someone who creates economic value. I want to be famous, wealthy, and powerful. I want property — a house, a vehicle, facilities. This is a long and familiar list. I call all of these Active Goals — not because there is anything wrong with them, but because people actively and vocally pursue them. They are goals that are on the surface of life, clearly named, and consciously chased.

But there is a second set of goals that I call Shadow Goals. Like a shadow, they follow us wherever we go — but we are not always aware of them. We notice them only when we look back, or when a particular light falls on our life from a certain angle. Let me name a few. The first is good health. India is today the world's leading country for diabetes and hypertension. The age group most affected is twenty to thirty. We seem to have allowed health to become a shadow goal — something we know is important, but do not actively tend to, until it suddenly demands attention.

The second shadow goal is taking care of our parents and elders. This responsibility is increasingly being pushed to the background of life. The third is the preservation of our rich tradition and culture — a goal that many people carry in the mind but rarely translate into action. And then there are the deeper goals. The Ācārya, in the Bhaja-govindam, reminds us sharply of what lies beneath the surface of this existence:

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पुनरपि जननं पुनरपि मरणं पुनरपि जननी जठरे शयनम् ।

इह संसारे बहुदुस्तारे कृपयापारे पाहि मुरारे ॥

*punar api jananam punar api maraṇam punar api janani jaṭhare śayanam /
iha saṁsāre bahu dustāre kṛpayāpāre pāhi murāre //*

"Again birth, again death, again lying in a mother's womb — in this ocean of existence, so difficult to cross, O Murāri, save me through your grace."

How to come out of this cycle — this is a vast and profound goal. Yet it too remains a shadow goal for most of us. It surfaces occasionally, touches us, and then recedes without ever shaping our behaviour. And finally, there is the deepest shadow goal of all: the inquiry into the Self — Ātmavidyā. Who am I? What is my true nature?

These two sets of goals — Active and Shadow — fall into two fundamentally different compartments. The Active Goals are all goals of pravṛtti: engagement with the world, activity, acquisition, and achievement. The Shadow Goals belong to nivṛtti: withdrawal, reflection, and the deeper dimensions of life. Our life, rightly understood, contains both.

The Vedic Framework: Pravṛtti and Nivṛtti

Śaṅkarācārya understood this with extraordinary clarity. In the Upodghāta — the preamble — to his Bhagavad Gītā Bhāṣya, he states in a few sentences what the entire purpose of the Vedic teaching is. He begins as follows:

द्विविधो हि वेदोक्तो धर्मः प्रवृत्तिलक्षणो निवृत्तिलक्षणश्च जगतः

स्थितिकारणम् साक्षात् प्राणिनामभ्युदयनिःश्रेयसहेतुः ।

*dvividho hi vedokto dharmaḥ pravṛtti-lakṣaṇo nivṛtti-lakṣaṇaś ca jagataḥ
sthiti-kāraṇam sākṣāt prāṇinām abhyudaya-niḥśreyasa-hetuḥ /*

"The dharma declared in the Veda is twofold: that which is characterised by pravṛtti (engagement) and that which is characterised by nivṛtti (withdrawal). Both together are the cause of the stability of the world and the direct means of material well-being and ultimate liberation for all beings."

We have largely lost sight of this sentence. Śaṅkarācārya says, explicitly, that both pravṛtti-lakṣaṇa and nivṛtti-lakṣaṇa are equally stated in our Vedic corpus. He says, further, that the stability of this very universe depends on our ability to pursue both. Not one — both. The crisis of modern living can be described precisely in these terms: we have built an entire civilisation around the pursuit of pravṛtti goals while systematically

neglecting nivṛtti. The result is what we see — a society that can produce eight-digit salaries and catastrophic rates of lifestyle disease simultaneously, and call this progress.

People sometimes say: "I will have a very active professional life, and when I retire at sixty-five or seventy, I will become spiritual." This is wishful thinking. One cannot simply go to sleep one night and wake up the next morning as a contemplative person. The roots of nivṛtti must be laid early, tended consistently, and allowed to grow alongside one's engagement with the world. Only such a person will attain goals in both dimensions — goals of pravṛtti and goals of nivṛtti. This is precisely why we need Vedic education.

What Vedic Education Offers

If a young person today properly goes through a Vedic education, several things happen — not all of them visible, but all of them consequential. The first and most important is the development of medhā-śakti — the power of retention and recall. The capacity to hold things in the mind, to retain what we learn, is diminishing in this country. This is a direct consequence of the abandonment of Vedic education. The discipline of Vedādhyaṇa inherently wires this capacity into the person. Even a partial engagement with it makes a tangible difference — in the classroom, in the workplace, in every domain of life.

The second gift is lateral thinking and positive speculation. These are the raw materials of innovation. In the last session on innovation, there was a discussion of how creative thought arises. One is invited to go and read the Nāsadiya Sūkta — the 129th hymn of the tenth Maṇḍala of the Ṛg Veda. In its ten mantras, there is extraordinary speculation about the origin of the universe — what existed before existence, before non-existence, before darkness, before the void. The Puruṣa Sūkta, the Hiraṇyagarbha Sūkta — these are works of deep cosmological imagination. We are denying ourselves access to this capacity for speculative, lateral thinking when we cut ourselves off from the Vedic corpus. Anyone who goes through that education will develop this capacity, knowingly or unknowingly.

The third gift is a balanced view of life. The most serious deficiency of the modern education system is that it tells children only good things will happen. This is a thoroughly western idea that has no basis in the reality of human experience. Our literature has never said this. The Bhagavad Gītā, in particular, is very clear:

मात्रास्पर्शस्तु कौन्तेय शीतोष्णसुखदुःखदाः ।

आगमापायिनोऽनित्यास्तांस्तितिक्षस्व भारत ॥

*mātrā-sparśās tu kaunteya śītoṣṇa-sukha-duḥkha-dāḥ /
āgamāpāyino 'nityās tāṃs titikṣasva bhārata //*

"O Kaunteya, contacts between the senses and their objects give rise to cold and heat, pleasure and pain. They come and go; they are impermanent. Endure them, O Bhārata." (Bhagavad Gītā 2.14)

Life is a rollercoaster. Young people can only be prepared for success in whatever they pursue if they carry a clear, calm understanding of this truth. Nearly twenty-five verses in the Gītā deal directly with titikṣā — the capacity to endure with equanimity. This is not pessimism; it is realism, and it is the ground of genuine resilience. No modern curriculum teaches this.

The fourth gift is a larger purpose of life. One of the finest statements of this is in the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad (1.2.12). After examining the world of action and its fruits, the seeker is directed towards the deeper inquiry:

परीक्ष्य लोकान् कर्मचितान् ब्राह्मणो निर्वेदमायान्नास्त्यकृतः कृतेन ।

तद्विज्ञानार्थं स गुरुमेवाभिगच्छेत् समित्पाणिः श्रोत्रियं ब्रह्मनिष्ठम् ॥

*parīkṣya lokān karma-citān brāhmaṇo nirvedam āyān nāsty akṛtaḥ kṛtena /
tad vijñānārthaṃ sa gurum evābhigacchet samit-pāṇiḥ śrotriyaṃ brahma-niṣṭham //*

"Having examined the worlds gained by action, a brāhmaṇa should arrive at dispassion — nothing that is eternal can be attained by what is performed. In order to know That, let him approach a teacher with fuel in hand — a teacher who is learned in scripture and established in Brahman." (Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad 1.2.12)

Śaṅkarācārya's commentary on even the first phrase of this verse — parīkṣya lokān, "having examined the worlds" — extends across ten to twelve sentences of extraordinary depth. How many of us have had the benefit of reading even that? Most of us do not even know such things exist in our corpus.

And finally, there is the question of scale — of vision. Modern management programmes speak of "thinking big." Our tradition addressed this millennia ago. The Chāndogya Upaniṣad (7.23) states simply:

नाल्पे सुखमस्ति भूमैव सुखम् ।

nālpe sukham asti bhūmaiva sukham /

"There is no happiness in the small. The Infinite alone is happiness."

This is not a motivational slogan. It is a precise philosophical statement about the relationship between the scope of one's being and the quality of one's experience. If only we would dip into these components of the Vedic corpus, the transformation in how we live and work — whether in a bank, a college, a social enterprise, or a temple — would be genuine and lasting.

The Crisis of the Vedic Corpus

This corpus is a precious inheritance, handed down through generations across millennia. And in the last two hundred years, for a variety of reasons, we have been progressively pushing it to the back burner. What has happened to Vedic education in practice is a matter that demands our honesty.

Some years ago, during a visit to an Āhārya, a remark was made that has stayed with me. The Ācārya said: "Do you know what has happened? In many Veda pāṭhaśālās, a student who fails in school and has no future in the mainstream world gets sent to the pathaśālā. Is this how we want to deal with our Vedic corpus? Is Vedic education something so unintelligent that we reserve it for those who could not succeed elsewhere?" At one pāṭhaśālā near Śṛṅgeri, the head himself said: "Sir, we have a serious problem. The tenth-grade failure gets deposited here. We cannot keep him at home, so for three years he cooks and does odd jobs while we think about what to do next." We have brought the Vedic tradition to the lowest common denominator.

Our Ācāryas enjoin us to perform Sandhyā-vandanam three times a day. Today, a large proportion of the Brahmin community does not do Sandhyā-vandanam — the reason given is the lack of time. There is a striking episode from the 1930s or 1940s: a group of people from Madurai travelled to Śṛṅgeri to ask Chandraśekhara Bhāratī Svāmigaḷ what should be done, since Brahmins were losing their core cultural moorings. The Ācārya gave them one answer: "If every one of us regularly performs Sandhyā-vandanam three times a day with utmost śraddhā, everything would be intact." It needs no elaboration.

There is also the matter of where we invest our energies in defence of this tradition. A great deal of what passes for community engagement today is what might be called WhatsApp forwarding — receiving messages, sharing them, and feeling that something has been accomplished. "The Vedas are great, the Upaniṣads say this, Sanskrit is a great language..." — copy, paste, forward. This is the postman's job. It will not take us anywhere. If even one hour of that time were redirected towards actual Vedādhyayana,

or towards ensuring that children in the family learn even a portion of the tradition, the effect over two generations would be transformative.

The demographic reality is stark. An email received just before this talk read, in part: "The Brahmin community in Palakkad is dwindling. Many have migrated away, leaving behind a once-thriving cultural hub. Take my own village, Tarakkad — it once had 135 Brahmin households; today only 30 remain, with a mere 10 having a next generation to carry forward our traditions. This trend is reflected across all 108 agraharams of Palakkad." This is not data from a distant region; it is happening here, now. And there is no reliable statistical picture of how widespread this is.

We cannot afford to be passive. We cannot wait for government curricula to change, for institutions to act, for circumstances to improve. If we feel this is important — and it is important — this community must take it squarely in its own hands.

A Call to Action: The Pratyajña

What, concretely, can be done? There is no need to propose vast, complex programmes. A simple, clear commitment will suffice. Our tradition prescribes that Upanayanam be performed in the eighth year — janmāṣṭame garbhāṣṭame vā. We have been neglecting even this. How many rules laid down in a company do we take seriously? Why do we choose to violate every rule that has been laid down for us as a community? Let us take a resolution: Upanayanam will be completed before the age of eight.

From the age of eight to fourteen — six years — let every Brahmin family take a vow that their child will receive some form of Vedic education. From the tenth standard onwards, academic pressure intensifies, and concessions may need to be made. But those six years, from eight to fourteen, are available. Even three days a week over that period is sufficient to plant the roots. There are enough people assembled here to design a thoughtful programme for those six years. It can be done beautifully, and it will transform this community.

No one is suggesting that a child trained in the Vedic corpus cannot go on to work in any profession — as an engineer, a manager, a doctor, a scientist. The point is the opposite. A child who has received this education will go into any field with a depth of being, a quality of mind, and a rootedness of character that no other education can provide. The Vedamātā, the mother of the Veda, will know how to guide such a child. We have lost confidence in this, and we need to recover it.

Let us not write a cheque and consider the matter settled. Financial support for Vedic institutions is one small step, but it is not the answer. The answer is a pratyajña — a personal vow, taken by each family: every child in our family will go through Vedic education. After that, let them go wherever their talents and circumstances take them.

This is not an enormous ask. It requires only clarity of conviction and consistency of effort. If we do this — if two generations of children go through this, from cradle to young adulthood — fifty years from now the tide will have turned. Our medhā-śakti will return. Our sense of goals — both Active and Shadow — will deepen. We will know how to state what we are truly seeking, and we will know how to go after it.

The discontinuity of the last hundred and fifty years is not insurmountable. It requires only a decision. We need to make that decision here, today.