

### *Helping new followers of Jesus from a Hindu background*

Fundamentals of discipleship will never change: helping others to develop their relationship with God, discover the Bible, grow in prayer, understand God's grace, live a life in dependence on him, guard against bitterness, grow in character and Jesus' lordship over their life. And it must be done in a context of prayer, and relationship.

Discipleship is not a matter of providing information to someone newer to the faith, but rather the one with more experience watching and supporting prayerfully how God is working in their friend's life, so that what the younger Christian learns is passed on to another generation. This is like a parent discovering how to parent their child by seeing how their child is growing, helping them learn to stand on their own feet. (2 Tim 2:2<sup>1</sup>, 1 Thess 2:6-12<sup>2</sup>)

But, what about particular areas relevant to those from a Hindu background? For simplicity I'll refer to the person as either Ram or Lakshmi, two common Hindu names.

#### Who should disciple?

Some would argue that only someone from a Hindu background can effectively disciple Ram or Lakshmi. Others wouldn't trust an Asian to disciple them unless they'd been to Bible college, especially if they had retained aspects of their Asian culture. Personally, I think we disciple those we're given – whether or not they are from our culture. Regardless of our background, or theirs, we can always pray, and care for them, but with humility. Paul took responsibility to pastor Gentiles, without seeing himself as inadequate or second rate – for God is ultimately the one who discipled – we are there simply to encourage their relationship with Him.

There are strengths, but also weaknesses from being from the same, or different background. And so there is value in working with others, just as parents need others to provide input to their children in particular areas, or at particular times.

#### Western individuality Vs Asian community – relating to family

In a western home it is not uncommon to leave home as a teenager, or certainly in one's 20's. In an Asian home it is not uncommon to live at home as an adult, and even to stay with one's parents after marriage. In the West we are encouraged to focus on our personal response to the gospel, whereas the Bible speaks also of households that responded to the gospel, such as Cornelius', couples who were present at their daughter's resurrection, like Jairus and his wife, and individuals who wanted to follow Jesus that he sent *home* to share what God had done. So it is important to treat Ram as part of a family, rather than as an individual on his own. For example, it is important to get to know his family as a family friend, but sensitively so as not to embarrass him, encouraging him to find ways of maintaining, and even strengthening links with his family, rather than drawing him away to meetings. And regularly praying with him for his parents, and brothers and sisters.

---

<sup>1</sup> 2 Tim 2:2

And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others. (NIV)

<sup>2</sup> 1 Thess 2:6-12

6 Nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, when we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. 7 But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children. 8 So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us. 9 For you remember, brethren, our labor and toil; for laboring night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, we preached to you the gospel of God.

10 You are witnesses, and God also, how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved ourselves among you who believe; 11 as you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged[a] every one of you, as a father does his own children, 12 that you would walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory. (New King James Version NKJV)

There have been many occasions when against my will, God guided me as an adult to listen to the advice of my Hindu parents. And I found it more effective to use Daniel's approach to saying *No* from Dan 1:11-14<sup>3</sup> (asking permission to try an alternative), than the stronger response of Dan 3:16-18<sup>4</sup>, I've found it has won credibility, and the right to say *No* when I've needed to for the sake of my conscience.

Just as Paul encouraged his readers to be a Jew to Jews and a Gentile to Gentiles, it is very important to encourage Lakshmi to retain as much of her family's identity and culture as possible. Even though my surname is based on one of the Hindu gods, as a follower of Christ I've found no reason to change my name to that of a Judeo-Greek background, or break my association with my family.

In Asia a Christian is someone who is born into the Christian community, rather than someone who follows Jesus Christ. So sometimes I've described myself as a Hindu by family and culture, with a faith based on the Bible. While this may not be easy for other Christians to understand, it reduces barriers to the gospel and is perhaps more accurate than calling myself a Christian, a name which our Lord didn't use to describe himself or his followers.

When my son was dedicated, we held the ceremony in my sister's home, for the home is a normal place for many Hindu ceremonies, and less intimidating to our unchurched family than a church. We called it a *Naamakarana* ("Naming ceremony") the Hindu name for the equivalent ceremony. To respect our Hindu elder relations, they were asked to announce the name of our son rather than the pastor. And many of the Bible readings were read by Hindu family members to involve them in the family event. While we didn't limit ourselves to a church culture, it wasn't a mix of different faiths since we only used the Bible for readings, the ceremony was led by our pastor in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and we made sure that everything that was said was consistent with Biblical teaching. Naturally as with Asian culture, the event was followed by a hearty meal.

By making the effort to dedicate our son in this way this way we discovered we'd made the gospel accessible to our whole family, Hindu and English. As one gets older, life events such as births, weddings, deaths are perhaps the only times for family members to meet. So if Ram makes the effort to express his faith in ways that are consistent with his family's culture, he will avoid cultural obstacles to the gospel.

Saying *Yes* where possible to family has enabled me to say *No* when required, for example, when asked to worship a Hindu god. I attend family Hindu ceremonies when invited but I won't bow down to the idol if it is brought round for personal worship.

### Religious & social background issues

More than one Hindu has said that they worshipped Jesus alongside other gods as part of their process of coming to faith in Him. As Jesus proved his power to them, they renounced their faith in the other gods. This is similar to how many western Christians come to a complete faith in Christ, making him Lord of different areas of their life over time. We shouldn't be surprised if we discover that Ram and Lakshmi are still at an intermediary stage, but support them as they progress through to a full reliance on Jesus alone.

---

<sup>3</sup> Dan 1:11-14

Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, <sup>12</sup> 'Please test your servants for ten days: give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. <sup>13</sup> Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see.' <sup>14</sup> So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days. (NIV)

<sup>4</sup> Dan 3:16-18

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, 'King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. <sup>17</sup> If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. <sup>18</sup> But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.' (NIV)

Disciplers should discover what was Lakshmi's understanding of Hindu concepts such as Dharma, Karma etc.: for many of these principles will subconsciously affect her behaviour. If they are not recognised and addressed she may continue to live as a Hindu, covered by a mantle of Christianity.

*Dharma* provides Hindus with a sense of responsibility to fulfil their particular role in life and society. There are aspects of this that are valuable as we follow Jesus, but also situations where following God will mean rejecting established social structures.

*Karma* is a concept of justice and consequence – we reap in this or a future life what we sow in this life. While reincarnation is not a Biblical concept, Paul reminds us that in this life there are times when we reap what we sow (Gal 6:7-8<sup>5</sup>). However our Judge is a person, not a system or rule, and he is merciful – forgiveness is available. And as we follow Jesus, there are always opportunities to start afresh. So the Hindu concept of Karma has some value, but it needs to be reviewed through the Bible.

Spiritually, there are forces in Hinduism that have spiritual power – as a Hindu, when I practiced Transcendental Meditation (TM) I sensed a blanket that subdued the creative aspects of my personality. And when, as a Hindu, I renounced TM, I felt a spirit leave me. This happened several months before asking Jesus into my life.

So Ram should be encouraged to renounce allegiances he may have made to specific deities or spiritual authorities. Their power should be broken in Jesus' name with the quiet authority we have in Christ (Eph 2:6<sup>6</sup>). Baptism provides a natural opportunity to do this, but this can be done at any time.

#### Equipping for telling others about their faith.

We are all unique, and God works uniquely in each of our lives but invariably following Jesus will have made a positive difference to Lakshmi and Ram. For example peace of mind replacing anxiety, a sense of God being with them through challenges they are facing, or the lifting of a huge burden when they asked Jesus into their lives. Encourage Ram and Lakshmi to be willing to share that unique difference with those they love and care for (Mark 5:19<sup>7</sup>), rather than a theology they themselves may not have fully grasped.

Similarly, they may find certain Bible stories or verses particularly relevant to their context. Encourage them to use those passages when telling others. For example coming from a religious background, they may have found it significant that Jesus receives anyone (John 6:35<sup>8</sup>), takes responsibility for us (John 14:3<sup>9</sup>), values people above

---

<sup>5</sup> Gal 6:7-8

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. <sup>8</sup>Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. (NIV)

<sup>6</sup> Eph 2:6

And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus. (NIV)

<sup>7</sup> Mark 5:19

Jesus did not let him, but said, 'Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.' (NIV)

<sup>8</sup> John 6:35

Then Jesus declared, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. (NIV)

<sup>9</sup> John 14:3

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. (NIV)

religious rituals (Mark 3:1-6<sup>10</sup>) . Or they may recognise the limitations of rules (Col 2:23<sup>11</sup>) compared to looking to Jesus for help (Col 3:1-4<sup>12</sup>).

Questions and listening are a great way of helping other explore these issues. Jesus used it (Luke 2:41-47<sup>13</sup>), and it allows Ram and Lakshmi to hear what their family and friends believe, as well as providing them the chance to share what they have discovered.

### Providing access to resources

Many of us take for granted the benefit of fellowship with others from a similar background, or the encouragement of worship in our language or cultural style. Asian fellowships exist around the country, and today there are events for Asians to enjoy such an experience. We should be willing to go to these events to equip ourselves, and also to take along Ram and Lakshmi. And there are many worship resources which for some will be particularly helpful.

### The golden rule

When it comes to helping and caring for those from a Hindu background, the bottom line is that we do simply that: love and care for them! Genuine love and concern, backed by prayer, will make up for many a mistake we might make, and will drive out our fears, as it does a parent for their child, or as it did Paul for the Gentiles, and reflects how Jesus treats us.

*Suneel Shivdasani, International Coordinator/Ministry Specialist for CVM ([www.cvm.org.uk](http://www.cvm.org.uk)), updated by him, from an article written in December 2003 for the Faith to Faith Consultancy*

---

<sup>10</sup> Mark 3:1-6

Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. <sup>2</sup>Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. <sup>3</sup>Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, 'Stand up in front of everyone.'

<sup>4</sup>Then Jesus asked them, 'Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?' But they remained silent.

<sup>5</sup>He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. <sup>6</sup>Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus. (NIV)

<sup>11</sup> Col 2:23

Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence. (NIV)

<sup>12</sup> Col 3:1-4

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup>Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. <sup>3</sup>For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. <sup>4</sup>When Christ, who is your <sup>al</sup> life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. (NIV)

<sup>13</sup> Luke 2:41-47

Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. <sup>42</sup>When he was twelve years old, they went up to the festival, according to the custom. <sup>43</sup>After the festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it.

<sup>44</sup>Thinking he was in their company, they travelled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. <sup>45</sup>When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. <sup>46</sup>After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. <sup>47</sup>Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. (NIV)