

DISCOVERING HARMONY IN LIFE

A talk by Sri Swami Advayatmananda Saraswati

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I am very pleased and humbled to be here to help Swaminiji and all of you celebrate the 26th anniversary of Arsha Vidya Argentina. I've been asked to discuss with you the topic of Discovering Harmony in Life.

Discovering harmony in life - why are we interested in harmony? Because we experience the opposite of harmony. We experience disharmony or discord. The world doesn't seem to behave according to my desires. I ordered a giant bucket of happiness and all I get is a little espresso cup full. The world doesn't give me what I want and often I find that the world gives me what I don't want. Often my actions do not result in the expectations that I have. This causes anxiety, frustration and discontent in me.

When I act from a place of discontent and disharmony, I contribute more to the disharmony in the world. The sense of disharmony that I feel is unnecessary and unwanted. If the sense of disquiet and disharmony were natural to me, I would be happy being discontent. I'd be happy being agitated, I'd be happy feeling out of harmony, out of sync, out of balance. But I'm not.

My entire life seems to be an expression of a search for harmony. I try to arrange the pieces of my life in such a way to create that harmony, and sometimes I am successful. Sometimes the world gives me what I think I need to be happy, to be at peace, to be in harmony. Sometimes the world manages to refrain from giving me what I don't want, what gives me disharmony. Sometimes the results of my actions are somewhat commensurate with my expectation. But it's a tenuous situation because whatever situation I set up or experience is bound to change.

In fact, I do find harmony, I find peace, and I find joy even for no good reason. When I watch a sunset, when I look into an infant's eyes, when I look into a loved one's eyes, when I just wake up on the right side of the bed, I am happy for no reason in spite of having thousands of unfulfilled desires. This is very important to note because it points to the solution to a fundamental disharmony I have.

So how do I discover harmony? It's useful to look at this in three different ways - How I discover the ability to express myself harmoniously in the world, how I discover the ability to receive gracefully what the world has to offer, and how I discover the solution to what seems to be a fundamental disharmony which I find keeps manifesting in so many ways in my life.



Swamiji's Talk

Let's look at musical harmony as an example. In western music there's a certain structure, a certain framework, which defines what harmonious music is. It has to do with the key that the song is in, what the time signature is, and with certain notes, certain chord progressions that fit well within that framework. In Hindustani music, which we had the pleasure of listening to today, the framework for harmonious or pleasant music is much different. The framework for Indian music doesn't center on the relationship between concurrent notes as it does in Western music. The framework for pleasant or harmonious music, if you will, in Indian music has to do with the rāga, the melodic framework, and tāla, the rhythmic framework.

In rāg todi today there were certain notes that the musician was allowed to play, because each rāga has a specific ascending and descending scale: Sa re ga ma pa dha ni sa, sa ni dha pa ma ga re sa. The rāga is defined by a certain set of notes, a certain ascending and perhaps a different descending scale. The ascending and descending scales may be different, and even the approach to certain notes may be different. The ornamentation on different notes may be different. All of this combined is meant to express a certain rasa, a certain sentiment. That is defined by the rules of the rāga, by the structure of the rāga.

So too there is a rhythmic structure as well. Within the structure of the rhythm there was a certain tāl, there was a twelve beat cycle. I was told it is a chautāl. Uno, dos, tres, cuatro, cinco, seis, siete, ocho, nueve, diez, once, doce, uno. When you understand that framework then you can understand the improvisation that happens within that framework as well as the relationship between what the melodic instrument is doing and what the rhythmic instrument is doing.

The third aspect of the framework of Indian music is the śruti, the drone, the tambura, which sounds the tonic, which sounds the sa. It is to that tonic note that all melodies resolve. The melody plays around that tonic note, going off on all sorts of excursions, but eventually it all comes back to sa.

And how does one learn music? One listens. One learns the structure, the framework of the music, and then one practices. So too in life. How do we find the melody of our life? How do we play that melody in tune? How do we recognize that we are not soloists, but that we are actually playing in an orchestra with everyone else in our lives?

Sri Krishna in the Bhagavad Gītā says, "Yogaḥ karmasu kauśalam". The literal translation is that one aspect of yoga, of spiritual discipline, is being an expert in action. But it doesn't mean you are the best lawyer or the best cab driver there is. That expertise is domain specific. This expertise is in regard to what constitutes harmonious action. Actions which are harmonious are those which are in harmony with what is called dharma. Dharma can be considered the natural order of things.

How do we know what dharma is? How do we know which actions are in harmony with dharma? Do we need a thousand rules? Do we need ten rules? No. Because it's almost embarrassingly obvious. I know how I want to be treated. So why would I treat anyone differently? I know that I want to be treated with respect, with acceptance, with forgiveness, with honesty. Why would I treat anyone any differently? I know that I don't want to be treated with the opposite, namely, with disrespect, with dishonesty etc. So why would I treat anybody any differently? This is sometimes called the golden rule or the ethics of reciprocity, if you want a big word. And it is natural and universal. It is a built-in heuristic, a built-in mechanism. It is easy to recognize, but not necessarily simple to act upon.

So what is this dharma? What is this order that we need to be sensitive to? The Śāstra, the Sanskrit scriptures of ancient India say: Ahimsā paramo dharmah. The paramo dharmah, the highest expression of harmonious action is ahimsā. If you study aṣṭāṅga-yoga, the classical spiritual meditation practices which has eight limbs or aspects and is described in the Yoga-sūtras, you know that the very first discipline is yama, which itself begins with ahimsā, non-injury.

Ahimsā is the one value from which all other values flow. And what is ahimsā? Literally it is non-himsā. In Sanskrit, when you put an akāra, the letter a, before a word, it indicates either the opposite or the absence of that thing. Himsā is injurious behavior. We all know what that is: stealing, lying, cheating etc. This applies in every sphere, on every level: Interpersonal, social, environmental, financial etc. In any sphere in which we participate there is this potential for himsā, for injury, not only towards the world and towards others, but we also seem to have a talent for expressing himsā or injury towards ourselves. We are often very hard on ourselves. We are our greatest critics. If I know how I want other people to treat me, why wouldn't I treat myself the same way? If I ask for compassion and understanding and acceptance from others towards me, why wouldn't I ask that of myself?

So himsā is injurious behavior. There is a little Sanskrit here. Technically, when you add an akara, the letter a, before the word himsā, it can have two different meanings. One is himsāyāḥ abhāvaḥ, the absence of himsā. What is the absence of injury? It is doing no harm. It is one side of the coin. I know what I don't want people to do to me, so I will not do that. If I don't know the song, I shouldn't try to sing.

Now the other meaning of ahimsā is not the mere absence, but the virodha, himsāyāḥ virodhaḥ, the opposite of himsā. What is the opposite of injurious behavior? It is compassion, generosity, acceptance, understanding etc. This is the other side of the coin.

With the practice of ahimsā we gain a sense of harmony within ourselves because we are more in harmony with the world. The Śāstra, the teaching, praises ahimsā in many places, including in the Mahābhārata. In one section Bhishma is teaching Yudhishtira. This is one place where we find the phrase ahimsā paramo dharmah. But then here Bhishma waxes eloquent. He goes on to quite beautifully say that ahimsā not just the highest dharma, but it is the highest act of generosity. It is the highest act of self-control, the highest meditation, and it is the highest offering you can make. Ahimsā is your greatest strength and your best friend. He says it is the highest truth and the highest teaching. And then he summarizes by saying:

Ahimsraḥ sarvabhūtānām yathā mātā yathā pitā.

He says the ahimsraḥ, the one who practices non-injury is yathā mātā, is like a mother, yathā pitā, is like a father, to all beings, sarvabhūtānām. That is how highly ahimsā is regarded.

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