

Do not Grieve

-Swami Viditatmananda Saraswati1

aśocyānanvaśocastvam prajñāvādānśca bhāsase

gatāsūnagatāsūnśca nānuśocanti panitāh

tvam – you; aśocyān – those who should not be grieved for; ananvaśoca. – grieve; prajñāvādān – words of wisdom; bhāsase – you speak; ca – and; panitā. – the wise; gatāsūn – those from whom the breath has left; agatāsūn – those from whom the breath has not yet left; ca – and; na anuśocanti – do not grieve.

You grieve for those who should not be grieved for. Yet you speak words of wisdom. The wise do not grieve for those who are living or for those who are no longer living. (Bhagavadgītā 2-11)

With these words Lord Krishna commences his discourse in the Bhagavadgītā. Reviewing the mighty armies poised for this great battle, Arjuna is overcome with deep sadness at the prospect of so many (beloved friends, relatives, respected elders, teachers and warriors) who must die before the battle is over. Arjuna's sadness was due to the grievous prospect of so many deaths. We rarely encounter a prospect of so many deaths in our life but we still experience this feeling of sadness. Sadness is experienced by all. If we understand why even death should not sadden us, then we will be able to face our life without any sorrow or pain.

Sorrow (śoka) is internal agony. No single event in itself is a cause for sorrow. How it is viewed and how one is connected to it, is what makes one grieve. We often consider ourselves either a victim of the event, or as a person who is responsible for causing that event. Our grief is caused by these perceptions. The same event, even a death, is viewed as a cause for sorrow, or indifference, or even celebration by different people, depending on their role and involvement. This indicates that the event in itself is not the cause for sorrow. What causes sorrow is the feeling that results solely from the thoughts associated with the event.

Since sorrow is caused by thoughts and not the event, we can stop grieving if we can alter our way of thinking. How can we accomplish that? This comes from recognizing that the root cause of such thinking is attachment (moha) or the lack of discrimination (aviveka). Discrimination (viveka) is the ability to evaluate an event (or an object, or a person, or a situation), for what it really is.

Sometimes we understand the reality, but do not accept the reality. Birth, death, honor, dishonor, heat, cold, profits, losses, are realities of life. When we do not accept the reality it causes us to grieve. The Bhagavadgītā teaches us how to remove our attachments and to accept the realities in our life.

Lord Krishna explains the phrase, *aśocyānanvaśocastvaū* (you are grieving for that which does not deserve grief) by elaborating that *pañóitās*, or those who have understood the true knowledge of the self and who can distinguish between *ātmā* and *anātmā* do not grieve for death. Not because they are callous but because they are able to clearly see the underlying reality. They can see the true nature of the self through the changes of birth, youth, old age and death. They recognize these changes as analogous to a change of clothing. Just as a change of body does not change the indweller. The *ātmā* is neither born with a birth nor does it die with a death. Through all the changes from birth to death, the dehin, the indweller, the *ātmā*, remains the same observer (*sākhī*). The *ātmā* is free from all changes.

Though the *ātmā* is immortal, we grieve because we lose the love, compassion and the company of our loved ones. To us death is real. Knowing the immortality of *ātmā* feels useless compared to the loss of a loved one; the knowledge of *ātmā*'s immortality seems to be of little consequence in our daily life. Lord Krishna explains that even if you consider death as real, it still does not behoove us to grieve. Death is a reality for anyone who is born. One must accept what is inevitable. Grieving only weakens us. It does not alter the situation. On the other hand, what is called for at that time is for us to continue to actively work without any loss of energy. If we can accept the reality of death as the *ātmā* casting off a duty (like used clothing that it no longer needs) and adorning a new body appropriate for its future progress, we will be able to face the situation and assess the reality.

Prasāda buddhi

We cannot change the situation. It is our duty to accept the reality and to continue on the path of action to the fullest of our ability. In our daily life we feel buffeted by even small events. He who feels elated with a favorable turn of events is bound to feel sorrow when confronted with a situation that he deems adverse. With such an attitude (of elation and sorrow), we find happiness to be a fleeting emotion as the life is full of adversities. How do we keep equanimity? The Lord tells us to recognize that all situations are flowing from His will. It is our evaluation of a situation, as favorable or unfavorable, that causes us to feel elated or depressed. The Gītā intones that we are responsible only for actions and not for the fruits of the actions. The results are bestowed by *Īśvara*. He is also the cause of the situations themselves. We should, therefore, accept the situations as well as the results as His *prasāda*. This does not mean that we should have no reaction to any situation. On the contrary, every situation calls for a reaction. The reaction, however, must be born of discrimination and not based on our emotions. A mind swirling in the waves of likes-dislikes, hate-passion is not a mind that is likely to be equanimous, or likely to show any *viveka* (discrimination). Accepting the reality of a situation means freeing yourself from the sways of emotions. Emotions arise because we have our personal "agenda". We have preconceived expectations of results from a given situation. Sorrow results from this "agenda".

Taking this a step further, we can see that even the situations we face are the result of our past karma. Each situation is created by Him to allow us to progress in this journey to higher consciousness. Accepting every situation, without evaluating it as favorable or unfavorable, but as a situation sent to us for our spiritual progress, would teach us to accept the reality. Both favorable and unfavorable situations are created by Him and are realities of life. How can we favor one and hate the other? The material gains are not the goal of life. The spiritual progress should be understood as the real goal of life. If, on our path of spiritual progress, we encounter material gains, they are welcome. This attitude is called prasāda buddhi.

Dharma niṣṭhā

We should recognize His role even while performing our actions, just as we do in accepting the fruits of these actions and in facing the situations He sent us. For this to occur, it is essential that the action itself be based on dharma (dharma niṣṭhā). When the action is in harmony with the universal values (dharma), our mind is free of conflicts. When we act against those universal values, there is a gnawing feeling of guilt deep within us. On the other hand, when you intentionally decide to follow the dharmic path, to act in accordance with the universal values, you are naturally forced to curb your desires for material gains. This propels one to the road of self discipline and spiritual progress.

Viveka

Sorrow is caused by the ignorance of the true nature of the self. Taking the self as limited rather than immortal and limitless is the real cause of grief. We tend to feel that the people around us are responsible for our sorrow. Their actions cause us discomfort, pain, dishonor, loss of face, etc. In reality their actions can impact us only if our mind is not in equipoise. A jnāni (a person who knows the true nature of the self) does not feel sad or elated when he encounters any situation. We can change the external situation only minimally. When necessary, we should definitely try to change the circumstances, but we must recognize that to be forever free of grief, we need to develop the necessary attitude of viveka to evaluate a situation for what it really is,

The Gītā outlines three steps to free us from the bondage of sorrow:

1. Accept the reality without evaluating situations. Accept them as His prasāda.
2. Accept the rule as Īśvara while engaged in action. His rule is dharma, the universal values.
3. Cultivate discrimination. Displeasure is born of the lack of discrimination.

Each step requires you to forego something

In prasāda buddhi, you forswear your personal agenda of likes and dislikes to the Īśvara who is the giver of karmaphala (karmadhyeksha).

In viveka jnāna (discriminating knowledge about ātmā and anātmā), you let go of the ego born of aviveka to the Īśvara or Paramātmā.

There will be no room for remorse in a life of actions based on this attitude.

In the concluding chapter of the Gītā, Bhagavān promises to liberate you from bondage if you surrender to Him.

sarvadharmān parityajya māmekam śaraṇam vraja
aham tvā sarvapāpebhyo mokṣayisyāmi mā śucah

sarva-dharmān – all pursuits; parityajya – giving up; mām – me; ekam – one; śaraṇam vraja – take refuge; aham – I; tvā – you; sarva-pāpebhyah – from all sins; mokṣayisyāmi – will free; mā – do not; śucah – grieve.

Giving up all pursuits take refuge in me alone. I will free you from all sins. Do not grieve. (Bhagavadgītā 18-66)

Renouncing all actions means renouncing your likes and dislikes of situations, renouncing actions based on adharma, and finally renouncing your ego. All these are replaced by embracing 'Ishvara'. The only desire left is to be free of personal based desires, Let His desires be my desire. When you accept as prasāda all situations, accept Him as the goal of your life, and serve with your mind always engaged in Him, He will liberate you from all sins (bondage). Bhagavān is always at your side. Faced with the situations which appear adverse, don't feel that He is punishing you. Those too are His blessings, His tools used for your spiritual progress. By renouncing your ego you are really renouncing doer-ship. Each renunciation brings you closer to Him. You will never regress once you accept the path of knowledge.

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