

Self-knowledge: The Only Antidote to Grief ¹

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The phrase, *tarati śokam ātmavit*, the knower of the Self crosses (over) grief, occurs in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad in course of a dialogue between the student, sage Nārada, and the teacher, sage Sanatkumāra². Sage Nārada approaches the teacher asking to be taught, and Sanatkumāra asks him what he already knows so that he can tell him of what lies beyond. Sage Nārada tells him in all humility that he knows the four Vedas and has studied the Purānas, Itihāsa, the rules of grammar, the science of numbers, the principles of logic, etymology, astronomy, the fine arts, and various other secular subjects. He then says, “But, Sir, all this knowledge has not helped me to know the self. I have heard from spiritual teachers like you that he who knows the self goes beyond grief. I am lost in sorrow. Will you please help me cross over sorrow?” Sage Sanatkumāra accepts him as a student, saying that all worldly knowledge belongs in the realm of mere words or names and is of limited consequence, and one must seek to know that which lies beyond everything else.

Sage Nārada is asked to meditate upon various entities, such as speech, the

¹ This essay is based on Swamiji’s 2020 Memorial Day Camp lectures on ‘*tarati śokam ātmavit*.’ Transcribed and edited by students of Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, Saylorsburg, PA.

² Chāndogya Upaniṣad, 7-1-3

mind, one's will, food, etc. as symbols of Brahman and later taught the knowledge of the self. Sage Sanatkumāra showed sage Nārada the other side of darkness, or helped transcend grief.

Grief stands for all mental afflictions

What is grief? Grief here stands for all mental afflictions, *samsāra* or suffering. It is a state of mind that reflects afflictions such as sorrow, unhappiness, distress, disappointment, anxiety, fear, hurt, guilt, etc. Grief arises in all of us, regardless of who we are or how accomplished we are.

In grief, we are overcome by a sense of helplessness and self-pity; we feel incapable of doing what we must do and avoid what must be done. We also feel limited, tired, fearful, and confined to this body-mind complex as doers and experiencers. This wrong perception is the result of self-ignorance, the fundamental human problem and reason for all grief and suffering.

How does grief arise? Grief, like anger, simply happens. One does not choose to grieve, just as one does not choose to get angry. Grief is the fundamental problem of the human being. In the vision of Vedānta, grief is the result of our ignorance of the true nature of the self and arises due to *aviveka* or non-discrimination between the self and the non-self. We are all born ignorant, and this ignorance persists throughout our lives. Unfortunately, we do not recognize it to be the source of our problems in life; we do not know what makes us grieve and conclude that the world is the cause of our sadness, frustration, etc.

The human being is endowed with the faculty of self-consciousness and sees himself as inadequate and wanting. Indeed, we constantly sense some lack in ourselves. That there is always someone else who is more competent than ourselves also leads us to feel inadequate. This perception of insufficiency gives rise to feelings, such as insecurity, fear, selfishness, or jealousy, which, in turn, result in attachments, aversions, disappointments, and frustrations. This is how grief arises. One's self-dissatisfaction can gradually also transform into self-rejection and self-condemnation. These are but varying degrees of the problem of sadness or grief. Unlike every other kind of problem, grief is centered on the self, and, therefore, the solution to grief also lies within. The solution to other problems, like hunger for instance, lies outside of the self, such as in acquiring and consuming food, but the problem of grief can be understood and addressed by self-knowledge alone.

The Bhagavad Gītā explains the anatomy of grief

In the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, sage Nārada is a highly qualified student, so the anatomy of grief itself is not discussed very much. However, Arjuna's state of mind is described in great detail in the Bhagavad Gītā and the teachings helps us understand it and deal with it better. Arjuna asks, "Overcome by faint-heartedness, confused about my duty, I ask you: Please tell me which is truly better for me³". His situation equally applies to all of us.

In identifying with his body-mind complex, Arjuna takes himself to be a *kartā*, doer, and suffers the likely consequences of killing his relatives and teachers. Like all of us, he looks upon himself as an agent of action and an experiencer or victim of the result of his own or others' actions. His mind is completely overpowered by grief. His situation equally applies to all of us.

As human beings, we are uniquely conscious of our emotional issues and problems. To begin with, our misperception of ourselves creates various states of mind, such as fear, anxiety, and irritation, which then manifest in our interactions with people around us as intolerance, anger, etc. This creates conflict and confrontation and results in suffering and unhappiness. It is clear from this that the problem lies in ourselves, meaning that our wrong perception of ourselves, or *moha*, delusion, is the source of all *śoka*, grief. It is the cause of all mental friction. An afflicted mind may even become very damaged and need other kinds of solutions, such as therapy.

Our minds are overpowered by *kārpaṇyam*, faint-heartedness or miserliness. The word, *kṛpaṇaḥ* occurs in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad: By definition, one who departs from this body without knowing *akṣaram*, the true nature of self, is a *kṛpaṇaḥ*, miser⁴.

Self-ignorance is the cause of grief

The one who knows the self becomes free from all suffering and attains happiness. If the knower of the self becomes free from grief simply by knowing the self, then the self must itself be free from grief. Self-knowledge simply reveals what is; it does not create anything new. The essential nature

³ *kārpaṇya-doṣopahata-svabhāvaḥ pṛcchāmi tvām dharma-sammūḍha-cetāḥ*, Bhagavad Gītā, 2-7

⁴ *yo vā etad akṣaram gārgy aviditvāsmāl lokāt praiti sa kṛpaṇaḥ*, Br. Up. 3-8-10

of the self is revealed to be free from grief or suffering. It is of the nature of unsurpassable happiness. That the knowledge of the self makes one free from grief means that ignorance is the cause of grief.

What is ignorance? Ignorance is that which manifests as all our notions or judgments about ourselves. Ignorance has two aspects: *Āvaraṇam*, veiling, and *vikṣepa*, projection. In the famous example of the rope-snake, there is *āvaraṇam*, in that we are ignorant of its 'ropeness,' and there is *vikṣepa*, in our taking it to be a snake. Similarly, here, our true nature is veiled, and we mistakenly identify with the body, sense organs, mind, intellect, and ego.

Five categories of identification or notions are discussed in the Taittirīya Upaniṣad: *Annamaya-kośa*, notions arising from identification with the body; *prāṇamaya-kośa*, notions arising from identification with the vital airs or physiological functions (e.g., 'I am hungry', 'I am sick'), *manomaya-kośa*, notions arising from identification with the mind, *vijñānamaya-kośa*, notions arising from identification with the intellect, and, finally, *ānandamaya-kośa*, notions arising from identification with the personality that is of the nature of *ānanda*, happiness (e.g., 'I am happy'). We identify with one or the other of these five aspects of our personality and judge ourselves based on that. We take ourselves to be a man or a woman, tall or short, a speaker or a listener, a mother or a father, etc. due to our identification with the body-mind complex. In short, we entertain all kinds of notions primarily due to our ignorance of the true nature of the self. The knower of the self is one who is free from the ignorance of all these notions.

Every notion, complex, or judgment about ourselves is a potential source of unhappiness, and the nature of the suffering will vary depending on the kind of notion or identification we have. We see in the scriptures that even *devatās*, like Indra, are not free from grief as they do not know the true nature of *ātmā*. This is meant to show the importance of gaining self-knowledge.

If we understand the nature of ignorance, we will come to understand the nature of the self. The 'I' is a complex entity consisting of consciousness and the personality. They are essentially the self and the non-self, and we are born with the habit of lumping the two together. They appear to be one in the same way as an iron ball when heated in a furnace appears to be a ball of fire. Ignorance is the inability to discriminate between the two and taking them to be one as a result.

Self-knowledge is separating the self from the personality

How can one transcend grief? Becoming free from sorrow is a two-step process. In the first step we acquire the four-fold qualification⁴, which is the prerequisite to gaining self-knowledge, by performing our *karmas* as an act of worship to the lord⁶. Having acquired these qualifications, which is not easy, we deliberate on the nature of the self as described in the scriptures with the help of a teacher. The Bhagavad Gītā teaches that knowing the true nature of the self is the means to get rid of our sorrow and delusion. It delivers both *brahma-vidyā*, the knowledge of the self, and *yoga-śāstra*, the means to attain that knowledge. The premise of the Bhagavad Gītā is that the knower of the self transcends grief.

Self-knowledge alone can lead us out of this ‘ocean’ of grief and delusion. Gaining the knowledge of the self is not an event but a process that culminates in total abidance in the self. The tradition is to start with addressing the healthy mind. For those whose minds are healthy, *vicāra* or the path of contemplation upon the nature of the self is prescribed. In the Bhagavad Gītā, Lord Krishna begins his teaching with a discourse on self-knowledge. The mind must become available and receptive to the knowledge.

The suffering arising from mental afflictions, like grief or sadness, is due to *aviveka* or non-discrimination between the self and the non-self.

The body is a product of gross matter, while the mind, intellect, etc. are products of subtle matter. We mistake them to be conscious entities since consciousness pervades every aspect of the personality. We take the personality to be the self. The knowledge of the self is of the nature of separating the two. The body-mind complex is but a vehicle for the manifestation of consciousness; even as it manifests, it makes the personality appear as though also conscious.

Separating the self from the non-self, or the person from the personality, is the way to know the true nature of the self. The self ‘shines’ in our awareness as the subject, and everything other than the self ‘shines’ as the object

⁵ The four-fold qualification, *sādhana-catuṣṭaya-sampatti*, consists of *viveka* or discrimination; *vairāgya* or dispassion; *samādi-ṣaṭka-sampatti* or the six-fold inner wealth beginning with *śama* (*śama* or mastery of the mind, *dama* or restraint of the sense organs, *uparati* or abidance of the mind, *titikṣā*, endurance, *samādhānam* or concentration of the mind, and *śraddhā* or trust and devotion), and *mumukṣutvam* or the keen desire for liberation.

⁶ *svakarmanā tam abhyarcya siddhiṃ vindati mānavah*, Bhagavad Gītā, 18-46

in the presence of the self. They do not exist in the same locus. The self, in fact, is never touched by the non-self. Lord Krishna begins the Bhagavad Gītā by addressing a student whose intellect is prepared and objective enough to discern the self from the non-self.

There are two causes of grief in Arjuna: One is at the level of the ego, where he thinks he will be the killer of people, and the other is at the emotional level, where he worries about the loss of his teacher and kinsmen. Lord Krishna addresses both these problems. It is the problem of death at the emotional level and the problem of hurt and guilt at the level of the ego.

Lord Krishna first deals with the problem of death. The death of a loved one, or even the potential death of a loved one, is very serious matter. It creates a great sense of loss depending upon the type of relationship one has with that person. The death of a loved one can cause a lot of emotional pain because we derive nourishment, emotional support, protection, acceptance, validation, companionship, service etc., from such relationships. Lord Krishna, therefore, explains the true meaning of death. The death of the body should not be equated to the death of *ātmā*, he says. Further, you are mourning for those who are not worthy of grief⁷. The wise, who know how to separate the self from the non-self, recognize that the body is the locus of the manifestation of the immortal. Grief does not arise in them.

Life continues from one embodiment to another, Lord Krishna teaches. It is neither created nor destroyed. We equate the presence of life with the existence of the body. The death of the body is taken to be the death of life, yet this body is but like a garment. We wear a garment only for a certain period of time, and the garment does not affect the person who is wearing it. The wise person knows this and discerns the self as being separate from the non-self. Death is certain for the one who is born, and birth is as certain for the one who dies. There is continuity of life; something dies but there is something that does not die.

Lord Krishna says that what dies is the gross body. All beings emerge from the unmanifest and become unmanifest again; in between, they manifest. There is an essential indweller of the body who does not change. This is the self which is conscious of the various stages of the body like childhood, youth, old age etc. There is grief because the death of the body is taken to be

⁷ *Aśocyān anvaśocastvam*, Bhagavad Gītā, 2-11

the death of the self. This is an unfortunate delusion because the self is free from decay, birth, death and ever-changeless.

The necessity for the separation of the self from the non-self is the first important teaching imparted to Arjuna. It is the nature of the body to change and perish, like a beautiful flower which withers away in a few days. When we recognize that the flower is perishable, we have a suitably appropriate relationship with it. Its perishability is accepted gracefully. Similarly, anything that we possess is subject to decay and going to perish. When we understand the nature of things and know them for what they are, we are also able to develop a level of comfort with them. We should learn to accept the nature of life and assimilate the realities of life. Living will then become easier. It is a tall order, but we have to develop a level of comfort with the realities of life.

The self is actionless

Conflicts arise when we do not know the realities of life or do not accept the realities of life gracefully. These conflicts result in grief or sadness. Lord Krishna teaches that birth and death are inescapable realities. Death is certain for the one who is born. The laws which govern this universe and our lives are inevitable and cannot be changed.

Lord Krishna goes on to teach Arjuna about the nature of the self. The self is indestructible and provides *sattā*, existence, and *sphūr̥ti*, intelligence, to everything. Everything that we observe and experience is also changing constantly and perishable. Lord Krishna points out that change cannot be sensed except against an unchanging frame of reference, which, here, is the one who is witness to the changes. He teaches us to recognize this knower or experiencer, the indweller of the body, the witnessing self that alone is changeless.

Afflictions and emotions, like grief etc. are the outcome of us focusing attention on the ever-changing body-mind and fleeting situations in our lives. It is in the midst of the perishable that the imperishable may be recognized. The self is not confined to this body-mind; it is the self of all. The immutable and infallible needs to be discovered as the one true self. If we focus our attention on the changeless amidst the inconsistent nature of situations, relationships, and experiences, we can enjoy their changeability. If we know that the perishable is not the only reality, there cannot be any grief.

After addressing Arjuna's erroneous notion of being mortal, Lord Krishna goes on to address his other erroneous perception of himself as a villain or victim. Any person is only as good as he is in his own perception. It does not matter who we are; what matters is how we perceive ourselves.

We are self-conscious and essentially conscientious beings. We are truthful, non-violent, and loving. In not knowing his true nature, however, one looks upon himself as *kartā*, a doer, or *bhoktā*, an experiencer. One may also take himself as a *bhoktā* in terms of being the object of someone else's action. Arjuna looks upon himself as a potential killer, the *kartā* or agent of the act of killing.

Ignorance makes us superimpose the attributes of the *upādhi* or body-mind complex upon the self. All actions are performed at the level of the body and mind alone, yet we are variously deluded due to the identification with the *upādhi*⁸. Even though we are pure by nature, we 'as though' become impure because of association with the non-self, which is impure. For instance, when lust, anger, greed, or jealousy controls us, we act in a manner that is quite contrary to our true nature. Very often, impulses such as attachment and anger do indeed take over when we are not alert and make us do things against our will. Then, we feel bad about ourselves, we dislike ourselves, we reject ourselves, and we condemn ourselves. The guilt we feel is due to our sense of doership.

When *kartṛtva* or the notion of doership is present, there is always a possibility that we may do something which we will regret later. It creates a sense of guilt. When *bhokṛtva* or enjoyership is present, we are the enjoyers or experiencers of the results of either our own or someone else's actions. Often, when we experience certain things, we feel like we are victims of others' actions. This induces a sense of hurt. When there is guilt, there will also be hurt.

One who thinks he is an agent of an action or a victim of an action does not know the self. Why? How do we know that we are ignorant of the true nature of the self? It is because the self neither kills nor is killed. The self is free from birth and death. All modifications belong at the level of the body. The self is also actionless. All actions are performed by modifications of the *upādhi*. In denying the modifications, *kartṛtva* and *bhokṛtva* are also denied.

⁸ An *upādhi* is that which imparts its own characteristics to something that is nearby.

The nature of the self as being actionless is revealed again when Lord Krishna speaks of one who recognizes his essential actionless even in action⁹. It is revealed yet again in the context of one who does not assume *karṣṭva*; I do not do anything whatsoever¹⁰. Then, who is it that sees, hears, talks etc.? These actions are the result of interactions between the sense organs and the respective sense objects¹¹.

What we understand here is that all actions take place in the presence of the actionless self. One who knows this does not suffer from the two major sources of grief– the death of a loved one and the affliction of hurt or guilt.

Self-ignorance manifests as our likes and dislikes

Our identification with the body-mind complex, *kārya-karaṇa-saṅghāta*¹², is responsible for our perception of ourselves as limited or insignificant. We are conscious of the self as well as the non-self, but we are aware of them differently. We are all aware of our body, mind, and intellect, and our organs of perception and action. The self 'shines' in the awareness as the subject, while the *kārya-karaṇa-saṅghāta* shines as the object. On account of our innate identification with the body-mind-sense complex, we acquire a variety of complexes and notions, such as *karṣṭva*, *bhokṣṭva*, etc.,. *Karṣṭva* and *bhokṣṭva* are present at the level of the intellect. That we assume the non-self to be the self is the fundamental problem of every human being and primary cause for suffering. Since we cannot make ourselves happy, we depend on others to make us happy. We find that there are some who like us, who help and support us, and in their presence, we feel comfortable and happy. We surround ourselves with people or things from whom we can derive acceptance and happiness. Our comfort and well-being are thus dependent upon others. This relationship that we have with our source of comfort is called *rāga*, attachment.

Arjuna, who was ready to fight the Kauravas, becomes emotional when he perceives them as his relatives; due to his attachment, he wants to give up his *dharma*. Śrī Śaṅkarācārya has commented that whenever one is overcome by *rāga-dveṣa*, he is ready to give up his *dharma*. What is the indication that we are overcome by attachment and aversion? Our willingness or desire to abandon our own duty to take up the *dharma* of another is a sure sign

⁹ karmaṇyakarma yaḥ paśyet, Bhagavad Gītā, 4-18

¹⁰ naiva kiñcit-karomi, Bhagavad Gītā, 5-8

¹¹ Indriyāṅindriyārtheṣu vartanta, Bhagavad Gītā, 5-9

¹² Aggregation of *kārya*, signified by the gross body, and *karaṇa*, instruments, or the subtle body.

of this.

The emotional problem of *rāga-dveṣa* is the most evident expression of self-ignorance. What is ignorance? It is the inability to distinguish between the self and the non-self, *ātmā-anātmā-aviveka*. Lord Krishna tells Arjuna: Better is one's own imperfectly performed *dharma* than the well performed *dharma* of another. Death on account of one's own *dharma* is better. The *dharma* of another is fraught with fear¹³.

Doing something which is in harmony with our nature confers *punya*, whereas *pāpa* is incurred when we do something unbecoming of us, or something contrary to our nature. Why does a person incur *pāpa*? It is because there is something within us, which, spurred by our attachments and aversions, compels us to go against our nature. As a result, a person may keep violating his nature, or his mind may become progressively insensitive. At some point he may even begin to justify doing something that is wrong. This is a slippery slope. If you do not pay attention, you may slip into the deluding disposition of a *rākṣasa* or *asura*¹⁴. Those who are devoted to sense gratification or ego and emotional gratification are *asura* by disposition. This gratification leads to a further compromise of *dharma*. One may become a *rākṣasa*, destructive in nature. Such people take up violent actions to hurt or destroy the world. Such is the potential nature of ignorance. At every level, the degree of suffering grows in intensity.

The most evident causes of grief are *kāma*, attachment, and *krodha*, anger¹⁵. Later, Lord Krishna also adds *lobha*, greed, and cautions that one should renounce this destructive triad¹⁶. These three impulses also include jealousy, frustration etc. When we are overcome by them, we are poised to compromise our own *dharma*.

We normally consider emotional pain to be a punishment and treat it symptomatically, like we treat physical pain. Our emotional pain signifies that we are violating some universal order. Pain is a blessing only if we understand its purpose. Emotional pain or grief is a given to us as a gift. By understanding the pain properly, we can release ourselves from the pain completely; we can become liberated in this very lifetime.

¹³ śreyān sva-dharmo viguṇaḥ para-dharmāt sv-anuṣṭhitāt, sva-dharme nidhanam śreyah para-dharmo bhayāvahaḥ, Bhagavad Gītā, 3-35

¹⁴ rākṣasīm āsurīm caiva prakṛtiṁ mohinīm śritāḥ, Bhagavad Gītā, 9-12

¹⁵ Bhagavad Gītā, 3-37

¹⁶ kāmaḥ krodhas tathā lobhas tasmād-etaḥ trayāṁ tyajet, Bhagavad Gītā, 16-21

In summary, self-ignorance manifests as attachment and aversion, *rāga-dveṣa*. Attachment and aversion include all our other baser impulses, such as lust, anger, greed, etc,. Grief or sadness manifests as *rāga-dveṣas*. When we are impelled by these emotions, our actions result in further *rāga-dveṣas*, and the grief grows in intensity. Everyone has a sense of individuality and a sense of insecurity, besides being self-centered. We seek objects and relations that are helpful in fulfilling our self-centeredness; these are our attachments. We become slaves to our *rāga-dveṣas*. We are unable to exercise our free will because it is hijacked by our impulses.

Performing one's duty helps neutralize attachments and aversions

We should seek to understand the spirit behind *varṇa-āśrama dharma* or the duties that were prescribed in the olden days based on one's caste and stage of life. In a duty-bound society, one is happy to do whatever is required of him as his *karma* or duty which is in keeping with his mental disposition. Every individual contributes to the harmonious functioning of a non-competitive society in this manner. Following *dharma* becomes important, not the outcome of *karma*. Everybody becomes a contributor in a duty-bound society. If you enjoy what you are required to do, the outcome does not have any great consequence.

Ultimately, what we are seeking is the pleased self. Learn to enjoy what you are doing. Develop a love for *karma*; *karma-phala* is not of great consequence. If we do not enjoy what we are required to do, we need something else, such as *karma-phala*, to give us satisfaction. This is how attachment to *karma-phala* comes about. We have to function in this society where most people are motivated by the outcome of their actions. All we can do in this situation is change our own attitudes towards *karma* and *karma-phala*. Our intention should be to become a contributor and strive for inner purification of the mind. Your desire should be to discover inner satisfaction. When *artha* or material wealth and *kāma* or desire become more important, the values are compromised, and this ultimately results in grief.

There is potential for infinite satisfaction within you. Tap the happiness within you. Look upon your duty as an opportunity to contribute in whatever way you can contribute. The reward will take care of itself.

To be continued...