

HOW TO HANDLE SORROW

New Year Lecture by Swami Paramarthananda (2002)

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Published by :



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How to Handle Sorrow?

*sadāsiva samārambhām sankarāchārya madhyamām
asmad āchārya paryantām vande guru paramparām*

There is a Sanskrit verse –

*sukham mē sarvadā bhūyāt dukham mā bhūt kadāchana
itīcchē sarva sāmānyē tē gnyānād ēva sidhyataha*

sukham mē sarvadā bhūyāt – means may I enjoy happiness all the time.
dukham mā bhūt kadāchana – means may I not face unhappiness at any time. *itīcchē* - these two desires, *sarva sāmānyē* – are common to all human beings and are common to all living beings.

May I be happy all the time, may I never have unhappiness. These two desires are basic and universal. *How to fulfill these desires?* - The verse itself answers, *gnyānād tē sidhyataha* – those two desires are fulfilled through Gnyānam or knowledge.

We will be surprised because we never think that knowledge is the one which will fulfill these two desires but this verse says – *gnyānād sidhyataha*. To add to our surprise, this verse also adds - *gnyānād ēva sidhyataha*. They can be fulfilled only through Gnyānam.

The question is how is it possible? What is that knowledge? We have to make an enquiry. For that, we should understand what we mean by Sukham and Dukham. *What is the definition of happiness and unhappiness?* We define happiness as going through any experience which we would like to go through.

In short, a wanted experience is happiness. Sorrow is going through any experience which we don't want to go through. We will think that all pleasant experiences are happiness because we would like to go through them. *What about painful experiences? Can we call them happiness or unhappiness?*

According to our definition, whatever experience we want to experience is a happy experience. Therefore, even if there is a painful experience, it is also happiness only if we would like to go through that experience. Even painful experience will come under happiness only if it is an experience which we want to go through.

Then, you may wonder, will anyone like to go through a painful experience? If you analyze, we have got innumerable examples to show that there are many painful experiences which people would love to go through and therefore, which is happiness to those people. You yourself will find any number of experiences.

I will give you one or two examples. There are mountaineers who want to climb mountains. And not ordinary ones, peaks of Everest and all such peaks they want to go through. We all know that mountaineering is not going to be a pleasant experience. One has to go through varieties of hardships.

It is a highly risky venture. It is full of pain and tension. If they have a family, it is a problem for their family members also. Therefore, climbing mountains should come under painful experience only. We may look upon it as an unwanted thing, but there are hundreds of people who plan to climb and who enjoy the suffering.

It is a peculiar irony – one who enjoys the suffering! For us it may look funny, because for us it is an unwanted experience but for a mountaineer, being a wanted experience, he classifies it under happiness. It is joyous for him. That is how often situations can confuse. It often happens to me also.

Many people come and share their problems in family life. Everybody has got some complaint or the other and I am generally used to hearing that. I try my best to console all the time. All the time used to consoling the people who are facing problems in the family life, whenever

somebody comes with a wedding invitation, my immediate tendency is to console.

That is my regular practice. Therefore, I am about to console and then suddenly, I see people neatly dressed in front of me and the card is yellow which means auspiciousness (Mangalam) and the people are full of smiles. Then, suddenly I swallow the consoling words.

This is not the time for consolation. Perhaps that may come later. That is a different thing. Certainly it is not the time for consolation. This is the time for congratulation. Because those who are going to get married want to go through the family life whatever be the hassles involved.

She wants to become wife and she is interested in wifehood whatever may be the hassles and he wants to become the husband whatever be the hassles. Later, she wants to become a mother even though it involves all kinds of discomfort in the form of pregnancy and intense pain in the form of delivery.

Then, bringing up the children, and working for their admissions which are even tougher than Mōksha. This couple wants to go through all these hassles. The moment an experience is a thing which I want to go through, whatever be the type of experience, it comes under happiness only.

Husband-hood, wifehood, fatherhood or motherhood etc will come under happiness indicated by yellow card. Otherwise, wedding invitations will have a black spot there. *Therefore, what is the definition of happiness?* Never say pleasant experiences or painful experiences. Happiness is going through any experience which I would like to go through.

Similarly, what is the definition of sorrow? Sorrow is going through any experience which I don't want to go through. That means, even a pleasant experience will come under sorrow only if I do not want to go

through that experience. Is it possible? I will give you an example. For Swamiji's there is no dearth of examples at all.

One man came, he had some problem and again he wanted consolation. He was telling his story that he is going through some financial difficulty. He has sold many of the things like his car etc. He has got a rich father-in-law. This father-in-law loves the son-in-law so much that he does not want the son-in-law to go through these financial troubles.

Therefore, he is forcing the son-in-law to take financial help from him. You know, his love for his son-in-law is because his daughter is with him. When I heard that his father-in-law is willing to give the car and all comforts, I thought this person must be the luckiest person.

Who gets such a wonderful father-in-law! Everything he receives freely and he should enjoy! As a Swami as appreciate it because that is my life – all the time enjoying somebody else's possessions. So, I thought that this is a wonderful situation and he should enjoy.

But this son-in-law thinks that it is below his dignity to take financial help from his father-in-law. Even if he walks, he does not want to take any help but because of the pressure from his wife and father-in-law, he is enjoying those pleasures because of force.

Though, the experience is pleasant, he is unhappy and he wants me to help him to solve the problem of comfort, problem of enjoyment. *What is the definition of sorrow?* Even a pleasant experience is sorrow if it is an unwanted experience.

Therefore, a wanted experience is happiness and an unwanted experience is sorrow. Therefore, in our life, we are all the time struggling to get wanted experiences (pleasant or painful) and we want to avoid unwanted experiences (pleasant or painful).

In spite of all our struggles, by using regular methods (our effort), irregular methods (going to astrologer, numerology, Vastu) – *Drushta* as well as *Adrushta* methods, we struggle. *What is our aim?* Getting wanted experiences and getting rid of unwanted experiences.

But our experience is that we miserably fail in fulfilling this. We try to avoid many unwanted experiences but they come in spite of our efforts. We try to get many wanted experiences but somehow, they seem to elude me. So, when we are so frustrated, the scriptures come to our rescue and they ask us to do some introspection.

What is the introspection? You say that all the wanted experiences are happiness and going through unwanted experience is sorrow. And you are not able to control the experiences because the experiences depend upon so many factors and we don't have control over all the factors or we have got only a limited control.

Therefore, the scriptures ask us a question. You don't have control over the experiences but I would like to ask a question to you. *Who has classified the experiences as wanted and unwanted? Whose job is this classification? Does this classification come along with the experience itself or is it my classification?*

The truth is that only the experience come, labeling the experiences as wanted or unwanted is purely my creation. Experiences happen because of innumerable known and unknown, controllable and uncontrollable factors. But wanted and unwanted classification does not happen because of any extraneous factor. It is purely my projection.

Therefore, the scriptures ask, why can't you try to handle what you are responsible for? You are not able to handle what happens in the world. *Why can't you try to handle what you are responsible for? And what are we responsible for?* – Wanted and unwanted classification is *Jiva Srushti*.

To use *Vedāntic* language, wanted – unwanted classification is 100% my job. And if I have to handle, I do have the power to handle because after all, I am doing that. *What is our next question? How can I handle wanted – unwanted classification which is very important for me because this classification decides whether I am happy or unhappy?*

So, it is a very crucial exercise because the whole happiness – unhappiness is dependent on this. And I have to do some enquiry to handle this wanted – unwanted classification. Again, Scriptures come to our rescue. When I look at the whole creation, there is definitely one thing that I will note, if I am intelligent.

That one thing is that the whole universe is an orderly, perfectly harmonious creation. By which I mean that everything happens perfectly according to universal laws. Nothing is an odd or freak or chaotic incident. Everything is governed by Universal Laws. That is why science itself is possible.

Otherwise, they have to revise every law year after year. Once a law is discovered by someone 200 years ago, that law we can use even now indicating that the Universe is perfectly in harmony. Veda calls it *Sukrutam Jagat*. Sukrutam means well done, well designed.

Therefore, whoever be the designer whom we call *Ēshwara* seems to be an omniscient and omnipotent one who has created this Universe in perfect order. Therefore, I find everything in the creation has got its role to play to make the Universe complete and orderly.

Whether it is a small microbe or whether it is the huge Sun, everything has got its place and everything has got its role. It is a marvelous creation. Any science you study, you can appreciate this orderliness of the creation which seems to function even right from my birth. That is the most common experience if we have to take.

When the baby is in the womb, the baby gets food from the mother herself and a beautiful connection, the umbilical cord is provided. We don't know how to produce that but it is all naturally, wonderfully well designed Sukrutam and the baby gets exactly the food needed.

The baby comes out after 10 months and the umbilical cord is snapped. Now, the baby cannot get the food through the regular passage which it was using till now. The baby has got too delicate a health to take the regular food from the world also. So, umbilical cord is snapped and the baby cannot consume the external food because it is too tender.

At that time, a wonderful event happens. The mother secretes the milk exactly at the time that it is wanted – neither before nor later. It is supposed to be a bio-chemical marvel. If you talk to a bio-chemist, he will talk about the marvelous bio-chemical events that are happening in the body of the mother.

The food is available for the baby. Not only that, but it is there at the right temperature. And it has got all the nutrients required for a baby of that age. Not only that, it has got all the antibodies required for the baby to fight the diseases that the baby can get. It is exactly planned. We have not interfered and we have not deliberately done it.

That is why it is good. We have not involved. When God takes care of things, it is perfect. The beauty is that the milk of the human being is suited for the human baby and the cow's milk is not suited perfectly for human baby. It is meant for the calf.

That is why, they are now propagating that mother's milk is irreplaceable. It happens at the right event even without our thinking or planning. Once we see this truth and this fact that the whole Universe is orderly, well designed by an omniscient, omnipotent Lord, then we have to extend further a little bit more.

All the experiences possible in the Universe are also an integral part of the Universe only. If they are the integral part of the Universe, no experience can be redundant. Because it is an integral part of a wonderfully designed Universe, I should understand that every possible experience in the Universe is perfectly in order.

If I say it is redundant, it means that I am immature. I have not appreciated the total order. If I am aware of the total order, that mature intellect will appreciate the fact that every experience is *Sthāne* – hey *hrushīkēsha sthāne*. Therefore, I have no right to classify any experience as unwanted.

If I classify any experience as unwanted, it shows my emotional immaturity. It shows my intellectual arrogance. I am challenging the omniscience and omnipotence of the Lord with my puny intellect which doesn't even know how to spell the word – Omniscient.

With such a puny little intellect, I am questioning the validity and the necessity of an experience. It is my childishness. So, if I have the Gnyānam of the orderliness of the creation, I will take a vow. *What is my vow?* Here after, I will never classify any experience as unwanted. I will remove the unwanted label from my dictionary.

Not only that, but I will put a new label saying that every experience is a wanted experience and it is specially designed for me. It is exactly like the mother's milk designed for me at that age. Every experience that I go through is specially designed for me by the Universal mother whom we call God.

Whereas, the Universal mother, through the milk of experience (every single experience), is nourishing my spiritual personality. It is meant, designed and required for my spiritual nourishment. That is why when the child is born, the father has to take the child to the mother and request the mother to feed the child.

When the mother gives the milk to the child, the father chants a prayer. In this prayer, the father says - O Lord, you are the universal mother called Saraswati Devi. You are the Universal mother Saraswati and you have to feed the spiritual personality of the child through the milk of varieties experiences.

Whatever experiences you have to give (pleasurable or painful) - so that through this milk of experience, the child will grow spiritually also. The mother has to take care of the physical growth and the Universal mother Saraswati has to take care of the spiritual nourishment. What a mantra!

*yastē sthana sthashayō mayōbhūh
yō ratnadhā vasu vidyat sudhatraha
tasya vishwā pushyasi vāryāni
saraswati twamiha dhātavē karihi*

This mantra comes in the *Brihadāranyaka Upanishad* towards the end. O Saraswati, you give the appropriate experience. Let the child not label that experience as unwanted. Let the child learn to label every experience as wanted and specially designed by Saraswati.

When the child grows, not only the father has to pray like that but the child also should train its intellect to look upon every experience as specially designed nourishment given by mother Saraswati. Therefore, this prayer is again included in the *Sandhyō Vandana Mantra*.

*āpō hishtā mayō bhuva sthāna ūrjē dadhātana
mahē ranāya chakshasē yōva shiva tamō rasa
tasya bhājayate hanaha usathīriva mātara
tasmā aranga māmavō yasya kshayāya jinwadha
āpō jana yadhā chanaha*

This is the training given to the child as it grows. O Lord, you are the universal mother. Just as my mother nourishes me with the appropriate food at the appropriate time, you should also nourish me and the

nourishment is only experiences. It is not a physical food but experience food.

Therefore, you give me whichever experience is required for my nourishment. If it is a painful experience, that also I refuse to label it as unwanted. I label that also as exactly wanted experience and I give it a new name. I don't call it *Shōdhana* but I call it *Sādhana*.

Those painful experiences are also Spiritual Sādhana. Krishna confirms in the 13th chapter - *janma mrutyu jarā vyādhi dukha dōshānu darshanam*. You have to necessarily go through all these experiences also. They are not unwanted.

They come under values like *amānitvam*, *adambhitvam*. They are also *Tapas* and *Sādhana*. *Brihadāranyaka Upanishad* says even diseases that you go through, look upon them as Sādhana.

*ētat dvai paramam tapaha yad vyāhita stapyate
paramagmhaiva lōkam jayati ya ēvam vēda*

In-fact, this section of *Brihadāranyaka Upanishad* is called *Vyāhita Brāhmanam*. A special section is designed to help us convert even diseases into a wanted experience called Tapas. You need not specially invite disease but when it comes, convert it into Tapas.

The moment you convert it into Tapas, it will become a wanted experience. *Whenever you go through a wanted experience, what is the state of mind?* It is happiness only. When you go without food on Vaikunta Ekādasi or Shivarātri day, that experience is named Upavāsa and you are happy to do that.

But during a train journey you are stranded somewhere and no food is available and we make a big fuss about that. So, what we could do on a Shivarātri day or Ekādasi day, the same event is happening in a train

journey but that you call starving. *What is the difference between fasting and starving?*

The experience is the same but when it is labeled - wanted, it is happiness. You feel spiritually evolved. When you say unwanted, it is unhappiness. You go without sleep on Shivarātri day and that sleeplessness is called *Rātri Jāgarana Vratam*. Vratam means you are spiritually nourishing yourself.

Another day you want to sleep and you are not able to sleep because of some neighbors' TV and then you call it insomnia. *What is the difference between insomnia and Rātri Jāgaranam?* Experience is the same but one you call happiness and the other you call sorrow. Therefore, the difference is purely made by a perspective change.

This you can appreciate only when you value spiritual nourishment. You have to be a Spiritual seeker. If you are a spiritual seeker, you will value spiritual nourishment. If you value spiritual nourishment, you are ready to take every experience as a wanted experience.

If you take every experience as wanted, you are always going through wanted experiences. Therefore, you are always happy and there is no unwanted experience in your dictionary. That means you are never going through unwanted experience.

That means you are never sorrowful, you have no regrets, you have no resistance. This is the only way to be happy all the time and this is the only way to avoid unhappiness all the time. This wisdom based change of perspective;

Other than this you do any other thing, you will find that you will be running after wanted experiences and will be trying to run away from unwanted experiences. You will miserably fail. Change inside;

*sukham mē sarvadā bhūyāt dukham mā bhūt kadāchana
itīcchē sarva sāmānyē tē gnyānād ēva sidhyataha*

What is the Gnyānam? Every *Anubhava* is wanted. That is the wisdom. And no Anubhava (experience) is unwanted. This Gnyānam or Gnyānam based maturity will make my life a happy life. Not only it will make my life happy but my attitude towards the Lord also will change.

Otherwise, whenever painful experiences come, I tend to question the Lord, curse that Lord saying – why me? I am such a wonderful person. I do Pūja all the time. I never tell a lie. Saying God is unjust etc. But the moment you change the perspective, I am thankful to the Lord because Lord is nourishing me by giving the appropriate experience.

Even sorrow is a crucible in which a metal is heated not to give pain to the metal but it is meant to purify the metal. We also go through Tāpa – heated experiences which are only meant for purification. Therefore, O Lord, I am thankful to you.

I have no regrets with regard to the past painful experiences and I am not worried about the future possible painful experiences also. Let any experience come, it is wanted and therefore, I welcome it. This is the Gnyānam required for a happy life as well as Spiritual growth. With these words, I conclude my talk.

*Poornamadah Poornamidam Poornaath Poornam Udachyathe
Poornasya Poornamaadaaya Poornameva Vasishyathe*

Om shanti shanti shantihi



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