

Five Principles of Healthy Living

Presentation by Swāmī Bodhānanda at Bharatiya Temple of Lansing, November 3, 2006

At the battlefield of Kurukṣetra, Arjuna engages his friend and charioteer, Lord Kṛṣṇa, in dialogue, asking numerous crucial questions that press upon his mind and heart as he faces his kinsmen and teachers whom he is to kill in battle. Arjuna represents you and me. We all have questions about right and wrong, our identity, the ultimate purpose of life, where we come from, who our Creator is, our relationship with the Creator, and the like. But unlike many of us, Arjuna articulates these questions well, choosing the right words. He is a straightforward, honest, rational, thinking person, who is neither a confirmed devotee nor an atheist. He is putting his questions to a very profound human being, Lord Kṛṣṇa.

Human life requires us to make a series of decisions. The faculty for making decisions is the intellect, *buddhi*. Sometimes, when it is difficult to make a decision, we debate, consult, or procrastinate. This was the case with Arjuna. But now, on the battlefield, he has to make a decision. He has only two choices: to fight or to take flight. There are many reasons to fight: he has been wronged; Duryodhana is a bad man; and so on. But there are also many reasons not to fight: on the opposing side are his teachers, many of his beloved relatives, and the battle will result in mass slaughter. Faced with the enormity of the situation, he cannot make up his mind. He is paralyzed, his bow Gāṇḍīva falls from his hand (*Bhagavad Gītā* I.30), and he is unable even to stand. It is not that he is afraid to fight, but is it the right thing to do? He realizes that what he needs is inner peace. He realizes the limitations of worldly things. For any of us, it is when such realization dawns upon us that we begin to become spiritual persons.

Fortunately for Arjuna, he has Kṛṣṇa at his side. In *Gītā* II.7, which gives us a glimpse into the turbulence of Arjuna's mind, he admits to the Lord his inner confusion and takes refuge in Him. He says to Kṛṣṇa: "I am thoroughly confused. What is the right action? How do I proceed? How do I make good decisions in this world? I am your disciple, teach me."

Kṛṣṇa first gives Arjuna a quick answer consisting of five pieces of advice – five principles of healthy living described succinctly in *Gītā* II.11-15 and then elaborated upon throughout that scripture. The advice is designed to purify the intellect so that one can make the right kind of decisions, thereby becoming a co-creator with God in the ongoing effort to unfold one's hidden potentials. These principles stabilize the person who practices them.

Lord Kṛṣṇa's First Advice: "Face problems calmly: do not worry, do not panic, keep your cool under all circumstances. Wise people never grieve" (*Gītā* II.11). This is the central teaching of the *Gītā*: "*mā śucaḥ*," i.e. "Do not worry," whatever the provocation, however serious the situation (*Gītā* XVIII.66). This advice contains a lot of psychological insight. Every problem comes with its own solution, but we are unable to see the solution if we do not remain calm.

Life is full of problems such as poverty, loss of reputation, bad health, etc. Even Lord Kṛṣṇa's life was full of problems. The only time we become free of problems is when we reach the burial ground. Some people never address problems, knowing that, once a problem is solved, there will be more problems. They live on the principle that it is better to live with the problems they know than to venture unto new and unknown ones. But this is an incorrect approach. When we face our problems courageously, we unfold our potential. Problems are necessary for self-development. It is like developing our muscles by lifting progressively heavier weights. There is no running away from problems, because the problems will surely follow us wherever we run.

One has to cultivate a habit of facing problems calmly. When the mind is disturbed, we cannot access its depths. But when the mind is calm, our spiritual dimension starts to develop; we begin to hear Lord Kṛṣṇa speaking within us. A new window opens, creative answers and innovative solutions pop up, all the hidden energies arise in us, and even our health improves.

Lord Kṛṣṇa's Second Advice: "Look within to find the solution to the problem." The solution will come from our own spiritual dimension. All energies derive from within. We arouse these energies by keeping our mind quiet. Mental quietude is achieved by such techniques as reducing our desires, watching our thoughts, practicing breath control (*prāṇāyāma*), and not reacting to situations. This is how we activate our spiritual core. We may think that we are not smart enough to come up with solutions, but the fact is that the *Self* is a reservoir of infinite energy. When we quiet the mind, the Self becomes our teacher and our creativity is awakened.

Lord Kṛṣṇa's Third Advice: "Be fearless; do not be afraid of old age, disease, or death." Death is a necessary condition of life. One who is born must die. Death simply means that one ceases to live the life that responds to stimuli. Birth and death are two sides of the same coin. Death is only the disintegration of the body – not disintegration of the Self (*Gītā* II.13). In fact, death is an opportunity to reinvent oneself. As *Gītā* II.22 says: "Just as a man casts off worn-out clothes and puts on new ones, so also the embodied Self casts off worn-out bodies and enters others which are new." One should be prepared to die at any time. One advantage is that, with the fear of death gone, we may experience a psychological boost that allows us to live much longer. There are examples of people suffering from chronic diseases who overcome the fear of death, regenerate themselves, and live many additional years. But a greater advantage is that, having rid ourselves of the limitations imposed by fear, we grow spiritually – we discover our Immortal Nature. And that is the beauty of being free of the fear of death.

Lord Kṛṣṇa's Fourth Advice: "Realize that pain is a necessary aspect of living. We should be able to accommodate both pain and pleasure" (*Gītā* II.14). To be alive means to be comfortable with pain. Pain can be physical (e.g. a wound inflicted by a knife), mental or intellectual (e.g. the pain caused by the sufferings in the world, the exploitation of defenseless people), or ego-driven (e.g. the pain of being ignored by one's good friend). Of these different types, only the last is avoidable; the others are inevitable. Especially of intellectual pain, it can be said: "The depth of our love is measured by the height of our

pain.” The sign of a cultured person is his or her ability to accommodate both pain and pleasure. Pains come and go; also, what is pleasure today may become pain tomorrow.

Lord Kṛṣṇa’s Fifth Advice: “Never *react* to situations. Instead, *respond* appropriately.” One’s response should be neither too much nor too little. Refrain from reacting. Think first, and then take rational action. If someone is stepping on your toes, punching him in the nose is an over-reaction, and keeping silent is an under-reaction. Both are dangerous. The first reaction may lead to a fight and the second builds up anger which, later on, may result in an explosion. The appropriate response is to simply tell him to move his foot.

Lord Kṛṣṇa’ says that a person who practices these five guidelines, who is not upset by the ups and downs of life and who can “keep his cool” or balance of mind, lives in contact with Spirit and can tap into a reservoir of spiritual energy; he is indeed “fit for immortality,” “*amṛtatvāya kalpaté*” (*Gītā* II.15). In that state of bliss, the threefold limitation (being bound in space, bound in time, and separate from others) disappears. Such moments of ecstasy, when we experience a transcendental state, are rare. We should seek to repeat this experience of ecstasy as many times as possible. And when we are in that state, we can tackle any challenge, whatever be its nature. Challenges become opportunities, and we emerge stronger and more divine. We develop utter reverence for the world, because such challenges have given us the opportunity to discover and unfold our depth. We become thankful to God and to the world that He created for us.