

Satsanga with Sri Swami Viditatmananda Saraswati
Arsha Vidya Gurukulam

More on Values

Question

Is compassion something that exists only in human beings?

Answer

Compassion applies only to human beings because only human beings can be cruel. The kind of violence that takes place in nature is meant for survival more than anything else. There is natural cruelty in animals that kill other animals. But it is not an unnecessary violence. There is a balance in nature that is maintained, such as ecological balance. So you find that there is no unnecessary violence in nature. Only man is capable of unnecessary violence and hence has a need to cultivate compassion. Animals are not cruel because they don't kill for the sake of killing, whereas, humans can kill for the sake of killing.

Question

Righteousness seems relative. What was not accepted 50 or 100 years ago seems perfectly acceptable today. What is right in one country or one faith is not right in another country or another faith. Should what feels right to me be the only guideline to be followed for critical or difficult actions?

Answer

Righteousness is a universal value. However, what righteousness means in a given context needs to be interpreted. Values are universal and objective, but their interpretation is subjective and based on time, place, and condition. For example, we can talk of Arjuna's confusion regarding the battle. What may be right in the palace is not right in the battlefield. Arjuna asks, "How do you expect me to shower arrows at them when they should be worshipped with flowers?" In this situation, both actions are right; in the palace, they are worthy of being worshipped with flowers, but in the battlefield they are worthy of being worshipped with arrows! The determination of the right relationship is also subject to interpretation. Therefore, values are universal, but their practice is particular or individual. Righteousness also needs to be interpreted in today's context as opposed to that of 100 years ago.

The interpretation of any value depending on the time, place, and condition calls for true maturity. Emotional maturity lies in being able to properly interpret a given value in a given situation. Our practice, then, ultimately depends upon our interpretation alone. I may have the ability to interpret the truth, but how I interpret it decides what I do. That will depend upon my maturity in interpreting what truth means. Therefore, while in itself righteousness is not relative, its interpretation in a given situation is relative and depends upon factors such as the context, time, place, and condition.

Question

Why did Lord Krishna not try to save the Yādavas?

Answer

Some of you may not know the background to this question. The Yādavas were the descendants of Yadu, also called Yādava. Lord Krishna was born into this lineage of Yadu and was a Yādava. All his progeny were also called Yādavas. Lord Krishna had 16,108 wives and each had ten sons. And then there were his grandsons. So the Yādavas were a huge clan. They were also a large and powerful army. The Śrīmad Bhāgavatam describes that ultimately, this also came to an end. The purpose of lord Krishna's incarnation was to remove all the forces of *adharma*. The Yādavas had lost their sense of righteousness. They were corrupted by their power and became lawless. Power breeds corruption and that is how *dharma* is compromised and *adharma* becomes strong. Because of this, many clans were destroyed. The Kauravas were destroyed, as also the mighty armies of Jarasandha and Kalayavana. Entire clans were destroyed, including the Yādavas. In this way, earth was relieved of bearing the burden of forces that violated *dharma*. Therefore, Lord Krishna did not step in to save the Yādava clan. You can see the tremendous detachment that Lord Krishna had. To watch one's own family being destroyed in this way would have required tremendous detachment, a compassionate detachment, knowing well that this was how it was meant to be and not interfere in the process. That is the reason Lord Krishna did not intervene to prevent the downfall of the Yādavas.

Question

Should any crime be punished to the fullest extent or should mercy and forgiveness be a necessary part of justice?

Answer

Someone in the field of law may be better suited to answer this question. Generally speaking, mercy and forgiveness are always in order in any situation. I am sure that even when they decide on the enormity of a crime, they must take into consideration all the factors involved. For example, I read in the papers that when a construction worker dies on the job, the construction company must pay a fine of some amount and another sum of, say, \$50,000 to the family. Yet even though this may be the rule, each case will be dealt with on its own merit, such as whether the injury was deliberate etc. Specific conditions of each case are taken into account even when interpreting the law. This is mainly so that injustice is not done to the person. Therefore, mercy and forgiveness are a part of justice. That doesn't mean that a crime will go unpunished either. Ideally, punishment is meant not only to correct a person, but also to set an example to society, as that being the consequence of such actions. While mercy and forgiveness are a necessary part of justice, I think that after all things are taken into consideration, proper punishment of a kind is also part of justice.

Question

Could you please explain how and why animal sacrifice is mentioned in the Vedas? Does it not go against the fundamental concept of non-violence?

Answer

I do not know why animal sacrifice is prescribed at all. Generally, a ritual has an overall effect; we do not know what each step generates. It is difficult to determine the effect of each individual step of a ritual. Even in the *abhisekam* that we do at the temple everyday, we perform every step the way it is prescribed. When animal sacrifice is prescribed as part of a ritual, it is not considered to be violence. Lord Buddha and Mahavir Jain protested against this aspect of the Vedic rituals. At one point, they stopped the practice of rituals involving animal sacrifice. That is why we call Buddha an *avatara*, an incarnation. Basically, the Jain religion highlighted non-violence or *ahimsā* and Lord Buddha highlighted compassion¹.

¹ Arsha Vidya Gurukulam Memorial Day 2006 Camp *satsanga*. Transcribed and edited by Jaya Kannan, Chaya Rajaram, and Jayshree Ramakrishnan.