

Life Is Cheap

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Margaret: Dear Ram, I've been watching the terrible devastation of the terrorist attack and it is so unsettling. Will you please repeat the prescribed attitude to the involvement or witnessing of "horror"?

Ram: There is no need to get emotional about it. What is eternal never dies. What dies is not real. Can you find any part of the human body that does not die? Arjuna got sentimental when he realized that he was going to have to kill a lot of men he loved and respected. So Krishna pointed out that death wasn't the problem, that if you are here in a body you are already dead. Life means death. So it is not a matter of whether or not you die, just how you die. "How" means the understanding you carry with you while living about what is permanent and what isn't. If you understand what part of the self is permanent and what isn't, you will not grieve. Krishna says, "The wise grieve neither for the dead nor for the living." Conventional wisdom has it that life is innately valuable. That we might as well grieve over the living as the dead is an implication in this statement. Why? Because the living are spiritually dead. One proof of this is the universal fear of dying. Perhaps you've noticed that everyone here is suffering, all those smiley TV faces notwithstanding. Why are people suffering if life is so damn important, so very valuable? One would think that we would be so appreciative of the gift of life that we wander around full of bliss all day long. But this isn't happening. It isn't happening because just being alive doesn't mean anything. One thing I learned from living in the Third World is that life is damn cheap. It is everywhere. In India you can buy a human being for \$80, have one done in for \$15 with no autopsy. Five thousand babies die every day worldwide of preventable diseases, and nobody says a thing.

Krishna is telling Arjuna this because he is about to teach him who he is, and when he sees who he is he will see who everyone else is and he will be able to go on with his life according to his *dharma*, his conditioning. It is a simple matter. Arjuna, who is just a symbol of every person, is actually the immortal self but he doesn't realize it. So after some good teaching from Krishna, he realizes the self, takes up his sword, Krishna drives his chariot, they have a battle royal and he does what he has to do.

People cling to life because they don't understand it. If they knew what it was they would live peacefully and face death with equanimity. But they think they are small and vulnerable and they look at all the shiny, sexy, wonderful things in the world and imagine that those things will make them feel secure. But life does not give one small damn about us. It is rushing headlong into the jaws of death. That is the fact. Everything cherished here it will unsentimentally take away. The only thing it can't take is you, unless you believe that you are the body.

When this understanding becomes one's own, one is free. One takes what comes with a grain of salt, neither rejoices nor grieves. It is the only way to really live. It is this understanding that we see symbolized in Christ's resurrection: "Let them stick those funny lances in my side. They have no idea what they are doing. They think they are sticking me." This is a man who knows that there is no death, who knows that his body is just a rag wrapped around his immortal soul.

Arjuna had to fight because he was trained as a warrior. His caste was entrusted with the protection of the society and the higher values were threatened by a devilish man, the son of a blind king (the ego) who was out to destroy the righteous people. It's actually a story about fighting the devilish impulses in one's own mind. The biggest devil in the human mind is fear of death, change.

While an intelligent person cannot accept the common descriptions of heaven and hell that religion treats us to, these very concepts have a deep meaning, one that is saying in a primitive way that there is no death. Heaven and hell say that death is not an end, just a change of circumstances. Something endures or continues beyond time. This is an unsophisticated concept, because what is meant to continue is the individual. But what I think it means is that the true individual is indestructible spirit, okay – soul – if you wish, and that does not die. So who am I? Am I what is left behind or am I what continues?

If you mourn the loss of someone, you haven't really understood love. You have loved what is transient, not the real person. Or you are sentimental, only thinking about what you have apparently lost. The real person is the only true object of love, and that person never dies. "So why this unmanly grief?," Krishna says. I think Osama bin Laden understands this. It is an idea that is very much at home in that part of the world. He knows he is a dead man.

But there he was today sitting with his friends in the morning sun, relaxed and alert, eloquently saying what he had to say.

Margaret: Mmm, questions are getting close to being rhetorical. Anyway, there they are and I might be interested if it happened to be hot one day.

Ram: Yes, I can sense the detached spirit behind them. There is a reasonable, truthful answer for every question, one that leaves the mind clear and happy. That the questions are getting fainter and fainter means that the answers are pretty well known. Eventually, the mind just stops asking. Some people figure out that the questioner is illegitimate and ignore it until it goes away. That was never the way with me. I knew there were good answers. And the Lord sent someone who showed me the scripture that contained them.

~ Ram