

God Laughs Twice

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The title of the paper is derived from the words of Sri Ramakrishna. He said: God laughs on two occasions. He laughs when the physician says to a patient's mother, 'Don't be afraid, Mother; I shall certainly cure your boy.' He laughs, saying to Himself, 'I am going to take his life, and this man says he will save him.' God laughs again when two brothers divide their land with a string, saying, 'Well, this side is mine and that side is yours.' God laughs and says to Himself: 'The whole universe belongs to Me, but they say they own this portion or that portion.'

So these are the two examples. First is about the physician's certainty about the future and his misplaced belief that he can somehow control it. The second example, with the brothers dividing their inherited property, is about misplaced claims to ownership. The key terms in these two examples are control and ownership. Let us look at these two words. Let's begin with 'control'.

How much control do we really have over the events around us, over the people around us, and over the world in general? Speaking about the past, we know that we absolutely have no control over the things that have already happened. Even what happened five minutes ago is now a thing of the past. No one can alter it. What is done is done. We cannot change the past. What we can change is our understanding of the past. We may re-interpret our past experience, and with that understanding we may read

the present. But we know from our experience that changing our understanding of the past or re-interpreting our past experiences is not so easy. A lot of pain or suffering remains embedded in our memories of past events. We may look more deeply and see whether we can understand them better. Those of us who have attempted to do that know that it is possible but it is a pretty difficult exercise, which is why we continue to suffer the consequences of past events. We are somehow not able to change the way we think about them.

So much for the past. What about the present? We do have limited control over events and over people at the present moment, depending on the position we hold in our family, or at our workplace or among the circles in which we move. It is possible that sometimes by virtue of our positions of authority we might be able to take decisions that might determine what needs to be done or how it needs to be done; who should do it, why and how they should do it. But even when we supposedly have some control over the present, we really don't have absolute control over people and do not know how they are going to respond to our decision-making. We may have control over our own words and actions, but we do not have control over the words and actions of the people around us. So we have no way of knowing in advance what the final result will be. So, when you come to think about it, even our

ability to control our present events is quite limited. At times, we expect one kind of result and things do not happen the way we want. That is because the world in which we live in is such a complex place that if one wheel can be controlled in this complex machinery, the rest must be left alone. Keeping all this in view, we realize that even powerful men have a very limited control over people and events. No single human being, no matter what position he or she is holding, is as powerful as we think. And whatever limited power they hold is constricted by various other factors.

Sri Ramakrishna's story of the physician deals with that. Now, by this I am not suggesting that there is no value in the physician's assurances. A doctor might go to the extent of telling the family that, yes, the patient is going to be okay. I would say, that's fine, provided the physician or whosoever says it, knows deep down that he is doing everything to bring hope in the mind of the patient's family but he is not God. That is why it is said, I treat, God cures. The doctor may put whatever knowledge he possesses to the best possible use. But the outcome of it is ultimately in God's hands. So it all boils down to this. We have no control either on our past or on our future. We have a very limited control over the present. And that is why Sri Ramakrishna said that God laughs when we fool ourselves into imagining that we can control the world around us.

It is not that we don't have any control at all. The only thing that we can really control is our own selves, our actions and our reactions. Not that we always succeed in doing it. But everyone of us has the power to control our actions and our reactions. Hence, the emphasis in Vedanta on self-control, not so much on controlling things and people and events, and anything

outside of us, but controlling our own selves. Two words are often used—*shama* and *dama*. *Dama* in Sanskrit means controlling our senses and *shama* means controlling the mind. What does this act of controlling mean? The senses and the mind are instruments in my hand, and if I use them well, I can do wonderful things—to myself and to the world. But if these instruments start doing things on their own, then I am in trouble. My favourite example is that of a car. When we drive a car we know that the car will do what it is supposed to do. If I apply brakes the car will stop. If I turn the wheel to the right the car has to turn to the right. Now if the car develops a mind of its own, we are in deep trouble. About the car we understand this perfectly. Not just an auto accident but a much greater disaster can occur when the mind and the senses become autonomous. Much pain and suffering happen, in spite of ourselves, due to actions initiated by our senses. These are instruments and they should have been in our control. If they were completely under our control we could have done amazing things. The reason we are not able to do is that we don't control them. So control is the keyword. Do we have the ability to control? Yes! Are we using that ability? Probably not enough. So the emphasis on Vedantic study and practice is on controlling ourselves.

Difficult as this practice of self-control is, it becomes easier and can be accomplished through God's grace. It is God's grace that helps us to control ourselves. But that does not mean that we can afford to sit idle. I like the analogy that Sri Ramakrishna gave. He said, when a little baby tries to learn to walk, the mother stands near by, encouraging it: Okay, get up and you can do it. If the baby tries to walk

and is about to fall, the mother will immediately hold its hands. But the mother will allow the baby to make an effort on its own.

I like this analogy because it reconciles the twin roles of self-effort and grace in our lives. God as Mother, or Father is always standing near by. When we make sincere self-effort in our lives, and do not give up, even if we fail, we suddenly see a breakthrough. Most people see this breakthrough as a stroke of luck. But a devotee sees it differently. He sees it as coming through God's grace. No matter how you interpret, we know, through the direct experience of countless people for centuries, that those who are sincere in their struggle achieve the strength at some point. Once we are able to accomplish that kind of self-control, more than half the battle is won. Ultimately, this self-conquest leads us to that highest fulfilment. And, interestingly, those who have been able to control themselves acquire a much greater ability to control the people and events around them. This is the first message. When God sees, according to Sri Ramakrishna's story, that we are trying in vain to control the external world, He laughs. But He will not simply laugh and go away. God is our Father and mother. He will laugh a sad laugh and wonder when His child will understand!

The second example that Sri Ramakrishna gave deals with ownership, the example of two brother dividing a piece of land between themselves. Here is a question the Vedanta students should ask themselves: What do I really own? What is really ours in this world?

When I joined the monastery, I just came with the clothes that I was wearing and did not bring anything at all. Four years later when I had to go to the monastic

training college at Belur Math, my room was full of books and clothes. I was in a fix because I would have to be away for two years. I had to bundle up everything, as there was no guarantee that after two years we would be coming back to the same monastery. So, apparently, we had to take whatever was ours and go. I spoke to a senior monk there and he assured: 'Don't worry. None of these things are yours.' You might feel that this is right for the monks to think that way. But this is true of all of us, no matter where we are. When we are born we don't even come with clothes. We just come with the body and the mind. And when we go we don't even carry the body. The body is left behind. We just go with the mind. Life is only an interim period between birth and death, during which we acquire not just material possessions, but also people, parents, brothers, sisters, children, and so on. A lot of things gather around us which we identify ourselves with in our minds.

In *Manusmriti* there is one verse which says—the only friend that follows people beyond death is *karma*, for everything else is lost at the time the body perishes. *Karma* means actions, both physical and mental. Mental actions are our thoughts. All actions, physical and mental, have consequences, good and bad. Good actions done selflessly purify our minds. All actions leave their impressions on the mind. And my *karma* which has not yet yielded some result in this birth will yield the results in some other place—heaven or hell, or in some other future birth. So that's the first thing to remember about ownership. We don't really own anything, including our bodies. Even what we imagine to be ours are not fully under our control. Hence the question asked in the *Ishopanishad*—*Kasya svid dhanam*—to whom does the

wealth belong? The answer is, it belongs to no one. All that we think belongs to us is given to us on a lease, as it were. Nothing permanently belongs to us, because everything in this world is impermanent. How would a devotee, a student of Vedanta see it? That is the point Sri Ramakrishna was making. If we remember that everything belongs to God we can have a better relation with people and things we see around us. If we love God, we love everything around us.

Suppose you have a neighbour on your left with whom you are on cordial terms and there is another on your right who has been troublesome to you. So when the neighbour on the left seeks any assistance from you, you go out of your way to help him. But this may not be the case with the other neighbour. You may oblige, but your heart may not be in it. But for a devotee there is no object greater than the love of God.

In *Narada Bhakti Sutra*, it is said that unalloyed love is reserved for the Supreme Being. So the devotee sees everything in this world as belonging to God and will take good care of them. The family is yours, but that has been given to you by God. The *Ishopanishad* begins with this:

Isāvāsyam idam sarvam yat kinca jagatyām jagat /

Tena tyaktena bhunjithā mā gridhah kasya svid dhanam //

Cover everything that you see—*idam sarvam*—with God, everything that is moving and not moving—*Yat kinca jagatyām jagat*—everything that is living and non-living—cover it with God. Another way of looking at it would be—uncover everything and see that there is God

everywhere. What we see in the world is covered by name and form—*nāma-rupa*. If I remove the covering of *nāma-rupa*, what I see is God and God alone. *Nāma-rupa* are products or coverings of *māyā*. When the coverings of *māyā* are removed, we see nothing but God.

What do we learn from these two examples given by Sri Ramakrishna? The two key concepts are control of the mind, and control of the senses. There is a word in Sanskrit, *shamasukham* which means the joy of control. You may not have realized God. You may not have any spiritual achievement yet, but to have the ability to exert control over yourself is a very satisfying experience. We might have experienced this in some small victories and triumphs in our lives. You may have been trying to overcome a habit and one day you succeed—it makes you happy. You are now able to hold on to that victory.

So let us try to live in such a way that we have a right understanding of control, right understanding about ownership. And if we live in that way then God will no longer laugh and shake His head, looking at our words and actions. Let us know the limits of our abilities and the absurdity of the notion of ownership. When we start believing that God alone is one who controls everything and everyone and that it is to God alone that everyone and everything belongs, God will no longer laugh but will smile, the kind smile of a proud parent, happy that the child has finally realized that truth. That is fulfilment. What else can we ask for? Nothing other than the reassuring presence of a parent can bring joy to a little baby. That is what we shall have. ■

* Based on a lecture delivered by Swami Tyagananda, Minister in Charge, Ramakrishna Vedanta Society, Boston, USA, and Hindu Chaplain at Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology, on 3 December 2017.