

Natural Calamities – Why? What to do?

(This article was written in Jan 2005 soon after a tsunami wave struck the Indian subcontinent)

The tsunami wave that lashed several Indian Ocean countries has taken a toll of over a hundred thousand people. The magnitude of the disaster has shocked the whole world. Many countries have rushed to offer humanitarian aid. Scientists are proposing improving detection technologies to decrease casualties in future calamities.

Natural calamities are a display of an awesome power immensely and fearfully greater than the human. They jolt us out of our complacent routines and impel us to think: Why do such natural disasters occur? How should we respond to them? Can we do anything to prevent their recurrence? Does God exist? If He does, why does He not stop such calamities?

The Law of Consequences

According to the great spiritual traditions of the world, we are answerable to God for all our actions. The Vedic texts of ancient India give the most cogent and coherent understanding of this system of cosmic accountability. Known as the law of karma, this universal, infallible law of action-reaction gives all of us our due pleasures and pains according to our actions, whether right or wrong. The Vedic texts therefore contain prescriptions and proscriptions to guide us in our actions. Anyone who violates these injunctions has only himself to blame for the consequences.

To some extent we ourselves can see how the law of karma chastises transgressors. Lung and other respiratory disorders penalize smokers; liver diseases afflict alcoholics; and AIDS and other STDs punish illicit sex-mongers. We may not be able to trace the causes of all the sufferings of each person, but humility will allow us to admit

the limitations of our vision. We do not and can not know about the karmic deeds and misdeeds of others – or even ourselves - in past lives. Even in this life, we cannot fully know everything that everyone – or anyone - has done. The Vedic texts give us a thorough philosophical understanding of the inherent goodness of God as our Supreme Father and the infallible benevolent nature of His jurisprudence. Therefore, they assure us that anyone suffering in any way is reaping what he has himself sown earlier.

The Price for Murder

Two activities declared to be monstrously criminal in the cosmic penal system, but which are rampant in our society are animal slaughter and abortion. From God’s viewpoint, these two activities are brutal; His more powerful children – humans - are ruthlessly and systematically slaughtering His weaker and helpless children – animals and infants. And the main reason for this ghastly massacre is often the selfish hedonistic desire for the enjoyment of the tongue and the genitals. Especially despicable is the slaughter of cows. The cow is like our mother because she nourishes us with her milk. And we “scientifically advanced cultured moderns” erect factories of death to murder our bovine mothers. Not only that, nowadays human mothers, who according to poets are supposed to be “the embodiments of selfless love”, murder their own children even before they have seen the light of the day. Thus we live in a civilization (maybe ‘devilization’ is a better word) of murderers.

Of course we have invented shrewd justifications to rationalize (rational lies) our misdeeds. A few of them with their refutations are:

- ♣ We need proteins coming from animal flesh for health (Modern scientific findings have clearly proven that meat doesn’t aid, but harms, our health; and there are many other sources of proteins too).
- ♣ We need to control the population and so must encourage abortion (Then why kill only the life inside the womb? Why not the life outside? Or why not control the sexual urge?)

- ♣ The embryo is only a tissue; so abortion is just a tissue removal. (The embryo breathes and grows, which is what all of us do too. So if a serial killer murders us, is that also tissue removal?)

A murderer may justify his murder, but the law of the state will still punish him. Similarly we may justify or even legalize abortion and animal slaughter, but the law of karma will still punish us.

Statistics show the horrendous massacre that we cause everyday.

- ♣ Total cattle slaughtered in 2004 = 16500000 = 44657 /day
- ♣ Total annual abortions worldwide = 46 million abortions = 126027 /day.

Thus the toll of life that we take daily (170684 deaths) is far more than the toll of human life that the tsunami took. So in a karmic sense we deserve far more, we have got less than what we deserve. The tsunami disaster is not nature's cruelty; it is karmic justice.

Karma in Action

Do we have to accept the existence of the law of karma on faith? Or is there any empirical way to understand its existence? The Vedic scriptures explain that karmic punishment comes upon humanity in the form of three types of miseries called the tri-vidha tapa. If the law of karma were true, then these miseries should have increased over the last century in which karmic misdeeds have multiplied manifold.

The three types of miseries along with their status over the last century are given below:

1. Miseries caused by our own bodies and minds (adhyatmika-klesha): e.g. fever, indigestion, stress, depression

We have eradicated some diseases, but many more incurable, debilitating and excruciatingly painful diseases – AIDS, syphilis, cancer, Alzheimer's disease, to name a few - have come up. And the mind is ravaging the human race like never before in recorded

human history. Psychological and psychosomatic disorders leading to stress, depression, insanity, addictions and suicides are causing havoc in the lives of many even so-called successful people

2. Miseries caused by other living beings (adhibhautika-klesha): e.g. mosquitoes, competitors, superiors, relatives

Crime, violence, murder and terrorism are tormenting us more than ever before. Human relationships have hit an all-time low. We proud moderns are unable to trust our own spouses, parents or children. Divorces are destroying the family, the basic building block of stable society.

3. Miseries caused by higher natural powers (adhidaivika-klesha): e.g. extreme heat or cold, floods, storms

Over the last century natural calamities have been increasing in both their frequency and ferocity. According to the International Society for Disaster Reduction (ISDR), there were three times as many great natural disasters in the 1990s as in the 1960s, while disaster costs increased more than nine-fold in the same period. The deaths from natural disasters have increased from 53,000 in 1990 to 83,000 in 2003.

Therefore for the intelligent, the reality of karma is not difficult to see. We can never break the law; we can only break ourselves against the law. A skeptic who jumps from the top of a hundred-story building can imagine that there is no law of gravity – but only till he hits the ground. Similarly we can go on with our godless sinful ways, imagining that there are no karmic laws – but only till the karmic reactions hit us as tsunamis or terrorism or wars or ecological disasters or in some other way.

Harmonize With God

So if we actually want to minimize the casualties due to natural calamities, better detection techniques alone will not suffice. Even if we detect a calamity in time and save ourselves from it, our karma

will still detect us and give us our due suffering in some other way. Unlike the human penal system, karma is a flawless system of justice. By science or some other material means, we may alter how, when and where our karmic reactions come upon us, but we will never be able to escape them. Therefore, if we want to be saved from suffering, we have to scrupulously avoid bad karma ourselves by giving up illicit sex and meat eating, which are the root causes of abortion and animal slaughter. Further we can protect ourselves from our past misdeeds by re-harmonizing ourselves with God. This can be very easily and effectively done by adopting the non-sectarian, universal meditation on the holy names of God, especially the mahamantra Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare. When a criminal becomes law-abiding, the severity of punishment is often reduced. This principle is all the more true in cosmic justice, for God is our benevolent Father. Then even in this life and in this world, by harmonizing with God we can be much more peaceful and joyful than by defying God.

And if we wish to truly help our fellow citizens on this planet, humanitarian aid will not be enough. We have to offer spiritual aid by giving the enlightenment and empowerment that comes from God consciousness. That alone will equip them to protect themselves from both bad karma and its reactions.

The Shelter beyond Calamity

Of course even if we live in harmony with God, this world will still remain a place of death. Many of us may have been shocked to see the ghastly sights of so many dead bodies in the aftermath of the tsunami. But statistics tell us that the daily deaths in the whole world number 147945, which exceeds the total tsunami toll till date. If death is so rampant and universal in the world, why are we so shocked by it? Because we have specialized in hiding and forgetting the reality of death when it takes its toll gradually through “normal”

ways. But when death takes a sudden and massive toll, our delusions are exposed - at least temporarily.

The Vedic scriptures urge us to not dream in vain for a happy life in this world, where death may overcome us at any moment. None of us wants to die; yet each one of us will be forced to die. This existential incompatibility indicates that we belong, not to this world of death, but to a world of eternal life. The Vedic texts explain that we are not mortal material bodies, but immortal spirit souls. We belong to an eternal spiritual world, the kingdom of God, where we live forever in a joyous harmony with God as His beloved children. When we rebel against God's authority, we are placed in the material world to experience the imagined joys and the real sorrows of living independent of Him. Equipped with material bodies – human or subhuman, we try to play God, competing and fighting to control and enjoy as much as we can. But no matter how great we become or imagine ourselves to be, nature ultimately crushes our egos through death.

The Vedic texts inform us that, during our troubled journey through this material world, we have gone through millions of lives. Therefore rather than being shocked at seeing so many deaths, we can soberly remember that we have ourselves undergone the trauma of death thousands of times. And the same ordeal awaits us again in the not-too-distant future. So the Bhagavad-gita (13.8-12) urges all intelligent persons to recognize the inevitable, inescapable evils of birth, old age, disease and death that haunt all life in this world. The Gita further urges us to re-awaken our dormant spiritual natures by living in devotion to God. Thus we can detach ourselves from material things which will be snatched away at the time of death and attach ourselves to God, with whom we will be eternally united after death.

The Vedic scriptures therefore assert that the sufferings of this world are a pointer to, a reminder of, our eternal existence. A fever impels us to take medicine to cure ourselves. The heat of the fire causes us to instantly withdraw our finger and thus save it from

being burnt. Similarly, the sufferings of this world impel us to redirect our hopes of shelter and happiness from this temporary material world to the eternal spiritual world. The intelligent course of action therefore is to prepare to return back to our home, the spiritual world.

Are we ready to wake up from the dream of safety and enjoyment in this world of danger and death? Or will we sleep on till our dream turns into a nightmare, by when it may be too late to wake up? This is the ultimate question raised by the tsunami disaster, which each one of us will have to individually answer.

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