

DISCOVERING HARMONY IN LIFE

A talk by

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I am very pleased and humbled to be here to help Swaminiji and all of you celebrate the 26th anniversary of Arsha Vidya Argentina. I've been asked to discuss with you the topic of *Discovering Harmony in Life*.

Discovering harmony in life - why are we interested in harmony? Because we experience the opposite of harmony. We experience disharmony or discord. The world doesn't seem to behave according to my desires. I ordered a giant bucket of happiness and all I get is a little espresso cup full. The world doesn't give me what I want and often I find that the world gives me what I don't want. Often my actions do not result in the expectations that I have. This causes anxiety, frustration and discontent in me.

When I act from a place of discontent and disharmony, I contribute more to the disharmony in the world. The sense of disharmony that I feel is unnecessary and unwanted. If the sense of disquiet and disharmony were natural to me, I would be happy being discontent. I'd be happy being agitated, I'd be happy feeling out of harmony, out of sync, out of balance. But I'm not.

My entire life seems to be an expression of a search for harmony. I try to arrange the pieces of my life in such a way to create that harmony, and sometimes I am successful. Sometimes the world gives me what I think I need to be happy, to be at peace, to be in harmony. Sometimes the world manages to refrain from giving me what I don't want, what gives me disharmony. Sometimes the results of my actions are somewhat commensurate with my expectation. But it's a tenuous situation because whatever situation I set up or experience is bound to change.

In fact, I do find harmony, I find peace, and I find joy even for no good reason. When I watch a sunset, when I look into an infant's eyes, when I look into a loved one's eyes, when I just wake up on the right side of the bed, I am happy for no reason in spite of having thousands of unfulfilled desires. This is very important to note because it points to the solution to a fundamental disharmony I have.

So how do I discover harmony? It's useful to look at this in three different ways - How I discover the ability to express myself harmoniously in the world, how I discover the ability to receive gracefully what the world has to offer, and how I discover the solution to what seems to be a fundamental disharmony which I find keeps manifesting in so many ways in my life.

Let's look at musical harmony as an example. In western music there's a certain structure, a certain framework, which defines what harmonious music is. It has to do with the key that the song is in, what the time signature is, and with certain notes, certain chord progressions that fit well within that framework. In Hindustani music, which we had the pleasure of listening to today, the framework for harmonious or pleasant music is much different. The framework for Indian music doesn't center on the relationship between concurrent notes as it does in Western music. The framework for pleasant or harmonious music, if you will, in Indian music has to do with the *rāga*, the melodic framework, and *tāla*, the rhythmic framework.

In *rāg todi* today there were certain notes that the musician was allowed to play, because each *rāga* has a specific ascending and descending scale: *Sa re ga ma pa dha ni sa, sa ni dha pa ma ga re sa*. The *rāga* is defined by a certain set of notes, a certain ascending and perhaps a different descending scale. The ascending and descending scales may be different, and even the approach to certain notes may be different. The ornamentation on different notes may be different. All of this combined is meant to express a certain *rasa*, a certain sentiment. That is defined by the rules of the *rāga*, by the structure of the *rāga*.

So too there is a rhythmic structure as well. Within the structure of the rhythm there was a certain *tāl*, there was a twelve beat cycle. I was told it is a *chautāl*. Uno, dos, tres, cuatro, cinco, seis, siete, ocho, nueve, diez, once, doce, uno. When you understand that framework then you can understand the improvisation that happens within that framework as well as the relationship between what the melodic instrument is doing and what the rhythmic instrument is doing.

The third aspect of the framework of Indian music is the *śruti*, the drone, the *tambura*, which sounds the tonic, which sounds the *sa*. It is to that tonic note that all melodies resolve. The melody plays around that tonic note, going off on all sorts of excursions, but eventually it all comes back to *sa*.

And how does one learn music? One listens. One learns the structure, the framework of the music, and then one practices. So too in life. How do we find the melody of our life? How do we play that melody in tune? How do we recognize that we are not soloists, but that we are actually playing in an orchestra with everyone else in our lives?

Sri Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gītā* says, "*Yogaḥ karmasu kauśalam*". The literal translation is that one aspect of yoga, of spiritual discipline, is being an expert in action. But it doesn't mean you are the best lawyer or the best cab driver there is. That expertise is domain specific. This expertise is in regard to what constitutes harmonious action. Actions which are harmonious are those which are in harmony with what is called *dharma*. *Dharma* can be considered the natural order of things.

How do we know what *dharma* is? How do we know which actions are in harmony with *dharma*? Do we need a thousand rules? Do we need ten rules? No. Because it's almost embarrassingly obvious. I know how I want to be treated. So why would I treat anyone differently? I know that I want to be treated with respect, with acceptance, with forgiveness, with honesty. Why would I treat anyone any differently? I know that I don't want to be treated with the opposite, namely, with disrespect, with dishonesty etc. So why would I treat anybody any differently? This is sometimes called the golden rule or the ethics of reciprocity, if you want a big word. And it is natural and universal. It is a built-in heuristic, a built-in mechanism. It is easy to recognize, but not necessarily simple to act upon.

So what is this *dharma*? What is this order that we need to be sensitive to? The *Śāstra*, the Sanskrit scriptures of ancient India say: *Ahiṃsā paramo dharmah*. The *paramo dharmah*, the highest expression of harmonious action is *ahiṃsā*. If you study *aṣṭāṅga-yoga*, the classical spiritual meditation practices which has eight limbs or aspects and is described in the *Yoga-sūtras*, you know that the very first discipline is *yama*, which itself begins with *ahiṃsā*, non-injury.

Ahiṃsā is the one value from which all other values flow. And what is *ahiṃsā*? Literally it is non-*hiṃsā*. In Sanskrit, when you put an *akāra*, the letter *a*, before a word, it indicates either the opposite or the absence of that thing. *Hiṃsā* is injurious behavior. We all know what that is: stealing, lying, cheating etc. This applies in every sphere, on every level: Interpersonal, social, environmental, financial etc. In any sphere in which we participate there is this potential for *hiṃsā*, for injury, not only towards the world and towards others, but we also seem to have a talent for expressing *hiṃsā* or injury towards ourselves. We are often very hard on ourselves. We are our greatest critics. If I know how I want other people to treat me, why wouldn't I treat myself the same way? If I ask for compassion and understanding and acceptance from others towards me, why wouldn't I ask that of myself?

So *hiṃsā* is injurious behavior. There is a little Sanskrit here. Technically, when you add an *akara*, the letter *a*, before the word *hiṃsā*, it can have two different meanings. One is *hiṃsāyāḥ abhāvaḥ*, the absence of *hiṃsā*. What is the absence of injury? It is doing no harm. It is one side of the coin. I know what I don't want people to do to me, so I will not do that. If I don't know the song, I shouldn't try to sing.

Now the other meaning of *ahiṃsā* is not the mere absence, but the *virodha*, *hiṃsāyāḥ virodhaḥ*, the opposite of *hiṃsā*. What is the opposite of injurious behavior? It is compassion, generosity, acceptance, understanding etc. This is the other side of the coin.

With the practice of *ahiṃsā* we gain a sense of harmony within ourselves because we are more in harmony with the world. The *śāstra*, the teaching, praises *ahiṃsā* in many places, including in the *Mahābhārata*. In one section Bhishma is teaching Yudhishtira. This is one place where we find the phrase *ahiṃsā paramo dharmah*. But then here Bhishma waxes eloquent. He goes on to quite beautifully say that *ahiṃsā* not just the highest *dharma*, but it is the highest act of generosity. It is the highest act of self-control, the highest meditation, and it is the highest offering you can make. *Ahiṃsā* is your greatest strength and your best friend. He says it is the highest truth and the highest teaching. And then he summarizes by saying:

Ahiṃsrah sarvabhūtānām yathā mātā yathā pitā.

He says the *ahimsrah*, the one who practices non-injury is *yathā mātā*, is like a mother, *yathā pitā*, is like a father, to all beings, *sarvabhūtānām*. That is how highly *ahimsā* is regarded.

But *ahimsā* is not always easy to follow. We may know what needs to be done. A situation might present itself and it may be clear what I need to do, but it may not be easy to do what needs to be done. But even so, conflict in life need not be a struggle. Imagine music without tension. What makes Western music interesting is the journey between tension and its resolution. The suspended third chord always resolves into the major tonic chord. In Indian music there is always tension deliberately introduced because the excitement is in the tension and then the subsequent resolution. Dha din din dha, dha din din dha, te re ke ta dhun, te re ke ta dhun, te re ke ta, Dha. There is the tension and there is the fun. Or imagine a movie without a story arch. Imagine a movie where someone is born, gets married, eats a lot of pasta and dies. Where is the interest? Imagine the football game with no competition, no goals. Conflict or challenges are the spice of life.

I am able to meet challenges with grace only if I am able to live in what is called in Sanskrit *Īśvara-sṛṣṭi*, which literally means 'in the Lord's creation', in the world as it is. In other words, if I am able to live with objectivity, then I can meet whatever presents itself to me in life with integrity and compassion. To be honest, we don't really want the challenges in our life to be over, because that would mean that we've reached the end of the story of our life. Our *prārabdha*, our *karma*, will have been exhausted, and it will be time for the curtain to close.

We find however that sometimes we don't have the objectivity to live in the Lord's creation, to live in *Īśvara-sṛṣṭi*. Why is that? One reason is because we have defined our harmony, our sense of peace and happiness, to be situationally dependent. I therefore need certain things in my life to feel good about myself, to feel in harmony, and I need other things out of my life to be happy. If my happiness is situationally dependent, then I have what are called *rāgas* and *dveṣas*, binding likes and dislikes, which determine my happiness. Having likes and dislikes in and of itself is not an problem. Non-binding likes and dislikes are called simply preferences. The issue is the binding nature of likes and dislikes.

For instance I might go out for a meal. I might be happy to enjoy either gnocchi or fettuccini for dinner. I am happy with either. Perhaps I prefer gnocchi, but if I get fettuccini - that is just fine, *muy bien*. Now imagine how a six year old might feel in a similar situation. He is going to a pizza party, and he has his heart set on having pizza. When he arrives, if they try to give him gnocchi, the six-year-old might throw a tantrum. "I want pizza, I want pizza!" he will scream and cry.

Sometimes it seems as though we have a six-year-old living in our hearts. This inner six-year-old lives in what we call in Sanskrit *jīva-sṛṣṭi*. *Jīva-sṛṣṭi* means the individual's world. It is relating to the world with a subjective, interpreted vision of what actually is. It is the world seen through my *rāgas* and *dveṣas*. Certain things will fulfill my *rāgas* and certain things will fulfill my *dveṣas*. The presence of the pizza for the six-year-old fulfills his *rāga* and the arrival of the gnocchi fulfills his *dveṣa*. He may throw it against the wall and declare "I want pizza!"

So how do we grow this little child in ourselves to transform our vision such that we live in *Īśvara-sṛṣṭi* rather than *jīva-sṛṣṭi*? *Īśvara-sṛṣṭi* is the world as it presents itself, unfiltered through *rāgas* or *dveṣas*. *Jīva-sṛṣṭi* is our subjective, interpreted reality of the world.

Look at the musician. If you noticed, 95% or more of the music we heard today was improvised. Jazz music is almost all improvised. In fact, the beauty of classical Indian music

or jazz is knowing how to improvise within the framework of the music. Freedom in life is having an understanding and having assimilated the framework of *dharma* such that we are free to express ourselves within that framework.

I imagine Messi (an Argentina football player) improvises, expresses his athleticism freely on the football field within the constraints of the dimensions of the playing field and the rules of the game. Although, once in a while he gets carded. Once in a while he may fall and grab his ankle trying to get a card on somebody.

What are the rules of improvisation? Improvisation is not just a series of random acts. To be a good improviser one needs to do two things summarized in this one mantra, “*Yes, And*”. If a musician is listening and he thinks “*No, But*” when his musical partner plays something that he doesn’t expect, then the glory of the music is ruined. If the musician listens and says, “*Yes*” and accepts what his partner is playing, then he or she is free to respond with what is there. If someone passes the ball to Messi and it doesn’t come to him, it comes ten feet ahead of him, he doesn’t fold his hands and say “No, I wanted it here.” He says, “Well I guess this is happening.” He accepts the reality, “*Yes*” without resistance and he responds appropriately.

I don’t know if you have ever heard of improvisational theater. This is the rule there. They give a setup, a situation. For example, the situation might be that a piano is falling from the sky right towards me. Now if I were standing underneath that piano, and I looked up and say, “No! That’s not the way it’s supposed to be!”, what would be the result? If I reject or deny what is happening, I will be unable to respond appropriately. If I say “Yes, I see what is happening, *and* perhaps I should step out of the way” , only then I could respond appropriately.

So how do we do this in life? The practice is, when we learn music, we need to listen, we need to learn to understand the framework, and we need to practice. Yoga is a practice. It’s something you do to create a result. And the result we are looking for is the ability to receive what comes without resistance, and then respond accordingly.

Let’s say my five-year-old child throws my mobile telephone in the toilet. I can acknowledge the reality of the situation and respond accordingly, or I can allow that situation to invoke my own inner five-year old and react inappropriately. What good will happen if two five-year-olds start to yell at one another?

So, the “*Yes*” part in Sanskrit is called *Īśvara-prasāda-buddhiḥ*. It is the *buddhi*, the attitude, wherein everything is seen as a gift from the Lord, grace. For those of you who have a religious disposition, if you believe in the model of *karma*, another way to express this is that everything I experience, whatever comes to me in life, is the result of previous actions. It is the *karma-phala*, the result of my previous actions. And actually you can never get away from *Īśvara*, the Lord, because He is the actual *karma-phala-dātā* - the one who gives the result of all action. He is this very mechanism of cause and effect in the world. And even if you don’t believe in the law of *karma*, which is fine, you can still recognize and accept that whatever the universe is offering to you at any given moment is what it happens to be offering to you.

But I think it is much more beautiful and true to look at this as grace. Really, *Īśvara-prasāda* means a gift from the Lord. In India when you go to a temple, you bring fruit, you bring flowers for the ritual. Then after the ritual is completed a bit of that is given back to you as *prasāda*. It may be a flower, some *vibhūti* (sacred ash) or blessed water. When you get the

prasāda back, it is inappropriate, not in keeping with the sacredness of the situation to say, “No, I don’t want the yellow flower, I want the purple flower.” It would be a bit like going to Holy Communion in the Catholic Church and asking for the chocolate flavored wafer.

This *Īśvara-prasāda-buddhiḥ* is also a recognition that we are not separate from the sacred. When I discover the devotee, the *bhakta* in me, in time my primary relationship in life is only with the Lord. Then everyone who comes to me is a manifestation of God because the vision of the *rishis* of ancient India is that there is nothing but God. And that goes through and through to the core of who you think you are. So I align myself with reality by gaining objectivity by greeting what comes to me without resistance. But it doesn’t mean that I don’t do what needs to be done. I respond accordingly. I don’t let people walk over me. I am not a lump of clay. I respond appropriately.

We have just talked about this “Yes” part of “Yes, And”. Now let’s talk about the “And” part. The “And” can be understood to be what is called in Sanskrit *Īśvara-arpaṇa-buddhi*. It’s the attitude, the *buddhi*, with which I see that whatever I do is an offering to God, *Īśvara*. *Arpaṇa*, is seeing that a response to a situation on my part is an opportunity for a sacred act, an offering to the Lord.

When my actions are aligned with *dharma*, within the framework of harmonious actions, then my actions become sacred. And by that, my life itself becomes sacred. So we see that by the practice of *dharma* we are able to express ourselves without injury and with compassion towards the world. With the attitude “Yes, And”, the attitude of what is called *karma-yoga*, we are able to receive and respond with some level of objectivity and equanimity, thereby interacting with relative harmony with the world.

But the problem remains that I am still trying to set the world up to fulfill my desires, because I continue have a sense of disharmony, a sense of disquiet, a sense of dissatisfaction with myself. It’s a bit like the *śruti*, the tonic drone which is sounded by the *tambura* in Indian music - the constant background drone in my life of “I want. I want. I need. I need. I want. I want.” I am less than what I want to be. I judge myself by things that in reality are incidental to me. I am obviously the body and therefore I suffer the qualities of the body. I am obviously the mind and the heart and so I suffer the problems of the mind and the heart. I have the conclusion that I am a wanting, limited being. And this conclusion is based on ignorance of who I am, of who I truly am.

The *rishis*, the sages of ancient India, expressed it this way in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*: *Tarati śokam ātmavit*, the one who knows the truth of oneself crosses sorrow. In other words, he relieves oneself of disharmony, finds one’s innate harmony. Another statement is *Brahmavid āpnoti param*, from *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, which means: the one who knows *Brahman*, the one who knows reality, gains the limitless. Notice the two words, *Ātmavit* and *Brahmavit*, the knower of oneself and the knower of reality. The *Śāstra* does not say, “Gather this information, do this practice, and you will become limitless, you will solve the fundamental, universal human problem.” But rather the *rishis* say: “You are yourself the solution to your inherent problem of disharmony. You are even now what you seek to become.” That is why the issue is not of theory and practice. Even though practicing *dharma*, practicing “Yes, And”, is beneficial and perhaps necessary, it is not sufficient to solve the primary, fundamental problem.

For example, let’s say, I am with a friend in the town of La Plata (A town in Argentina near Buenos Aires)

And the friend turns to me and says, "I need to know how to get to La Plata. Please tell me how to get there."

How do I tell my friend how to get to La Plata, while we are having this conversation in La Plata itself?

What keeps my friend from going to La Plata?

What separates my friend from La Plata?

It is the mere ignorance of an existent fact. He is already where he wants to be.

And so I say, *Tat tvam asi*. You are that. You are already where you want to be.

This is the role of a *guru*.

This why we have the Fundación Arsha Vidya here in Argentina - because this teaching tradition holds the method to unfold the fact that you already are what you seek to become.

This is the vision of the sages of ancient India. The teacher is able to transform your vision of yourself from one of being a limited, wanting individual to being the Truth of all that is. What is required is that the teacher has this same vision, the same self-knowledge of himself or herself as that of the *rishis*, the sages of ancient India, and has the *sampradāya*, the teaching methodology that is required to unfold that vision to the student. This vision, this solution to the fundamental problem is gained through *śravaṇam*, through listening to the words of the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, and the *Bhagavad Gita* unfolded by the teacher.

The teacher will do this by investigating three things: The nature of the individual - who am I?; The nature of the world - what is the reality of the world?; And God - Is there a God, and if there is, what is the nature of God? And finally, the teacher will lead the student through an inquiry into the relationship between me, the world and God.

In the end, there is no fundamental difference between these three. In reality, the fundamental sense of disharmony is not removed by creating harmony, because harmony necessitates an *other* with whom to harmonize. In truth there is no *other*. This is the vision of *Advaita* (non-dual) Vedanta. Vedanta is *advaita*, so we need not even say "*Advaita* Vedanta". "Vedanta" is good enough.

In order to fully understand and assimilate this knowledge we have teachers like Pujya Swamiji and Swamini Vilasananda and all the other teachers who are here. You are very blessed to have this tradition in this city and I encourage you all to support the efforts here so that this living vision, this living teaching tradition of freedom and harmony, can be passed from generation to generation.

Om Tat Sat.