

Satsang with Swami Viditatmananda Saraswati
Arsha Vidya Gurukulam
Dealing with Death

Question

How valid is the belief in ghosts? Why should we perform rituals for the dead?

Answer

After death, when the subtle body departs from this physical body, it must take some kind of a body. Even if you say it becomes a ghost, still, that is also a body. It will have some kind of *upādhi*. They say that it is a body made of air. So the *bhūta*, *preta* or *piśāca* must be there, because they talk about these bodies.

The performance of *srāddha* depends upon our own *śraddhā*. That which is done with faith is called *śrāddha*. It is a matter of belief. It is said that when the soul departs from this body, it goes to the *pitṛloka*, the world of manes. It supposedly takes 12 days for it to travel. That is why we perform various ceremonies for those 12 days after death.

During that time you want to make sure that the travel is comfortable. You also want to make sure that it does not deviate from its path due to the lack of some *punya karma* and that it reaches its destination. To aid in that journey we perform various rituals so that the *punya karma* we earn as a result, is available to the departed soul. This is performed for three generations on both the father's and the mother's sides. If it so happens that the soul has taken another birth, it does not matter. We give it the benefit of the doubt. Since it is an act that gives you some *punya*, if this *punya* does not go to the soul, it will accrue to you.

Question

After death, does the *jīva* go immediately to another body? How can you prove it? What about ghosts?

Answer

Yes, the *jīva* goes to another embodiment immediately, and we cannot disprove it nor prove it. In performing every action, we are creating a blueprint for our own self, based on which we attain an embodiment. Ghost is also an embodiment. Every *loka* has

its appropriate body. Our body is predominantly made of earth here in this *loka*. In heaven, the body is predominantly made of the element fire; ghosts have *vāyu* as a predominant element.

Question

Do you believe in rebirth, and if so on what basis?

Answer

There is no birth or death. Nothing new is born. It is nothing but continuation of life; just the embodiment changes. Just as there is conservation of matter and energy, so is there conservation of life. Just as energy changes from one form to the other, so does life change from one form to the other. That is why we accept that there has to be past births. Each one of us is unique, and there must be a reason for that uniqueness; and the reason is that each one of us has a unique history.

Question

Will I be with the same people in my next life?

Answer

Sometimes, if there is a very strong bond, it is likely to happen. We may also have some accounts to settle, and so some of these people may appear in the next life also. You may find some people who love you or dislike you for no obvious reason. Then you have to say that there must be some history in the past. Generally, it is not that the same people will be there; there is no rule like that. It is a new game.

Question

How does one deal with sorrow associated with grief, especially when it is associated with loss of a loved one?

Answer

It is difficult. We have to go through that pain—there is no choice. All we can do is to use that pain to pray for the loved one, and perhaps do something good; perhaps continue whatever work was dear to the loved one. Perhaps our love for the loved one

can be expressed through some useful activity. Maybe I can reach out and help in someone else's grief, and that may help me with my own grief.

Question

Is there a way for us to prepare ourselves for death?

Answer

Yes. In the 8th chapter of the Bhagavad Gītā, Lord Krishna talks about this. *Bhagavān* says, whatever your last thought is at the time of death, determines your destiny for the next life. If your last thought is about me, then you will come to me. So what should you do? “Hey Arjuna, always think about me.” The way to prepare for death is to lead a certain way of life. The last thought does not come just by itself. What determines my last thought is the kind of thoughts that I entertain throughout my life. ‘*sadā tadbhāvabhāvitaḥ*’, “The most predominant *bhāvana* or thought you entertain is what determines your last thought” [BG 8-7].

It does not matter what your physical condition is. If you want your death to be auspicious, auspicious thoughts should arise in your mind. Thus may I entertain auspicious thoughts while living my life, doing good work, helping others, serving others, having prayerful thoughts and appreciating the grace of God! The process of being aware of these things and the kind of thoughts that we entertain, mould our minds.¹

¹ Transcribed and edited by Anjali Bhat, Aparna Modi, Jayshree Ramakrishnan and KK Davey.