

Satsang with Sri Swami Vidadatmananda Saraswati
Arsha Vidya Gurukulam
Dealing with Old Age and Death

Question

The body gets old, but the mind does not seem to age. Please comment.

Answer

The mind ages just as much as the body does. In the same way as the body loses its vitality when it gets old, the mind too loses its vitality when it gets old. The mind loses its agility and becomes slow. We cannot remember or grasp things easily. When our vital energy, the *prāṇā*, gets old, everything gets old.

Question

But as we age, our mind does appear to have more energy than our body.

Answer

Our mind gets old in terms of its capacity to retain or remember, but in terms of its ability to think, it becomes more distracted. Śrī Śaṅkarācārya says that in old age, despite a weak body and weak sense organs and despite losing all its capacities, our mind is still engaged in constantly thinking about various things. The mind is not able to deal with many issues, and is therefore worried about small things. It creates many anxieties on its own and keeps on worrying about them. In old age, the mind begins to project its concerns; it imagines what might happen to this and what might happen to that and keeps worrying about such hypothetical situations.

Question

Shouldn't knowledge help in old age?

Answer

Yes, knowledge should help. The best thing to do is to keep the mind engaged in desirable thoughts. Occupy the mind with reciting God's name; keep it busy with chanting, or with *pūjā*. “But Swamiji, when I start reciting a *sloka*, my mind begins to wander.” It will wander, but you have to train your mind to get back on track.

Question

Do people become more materialistic in old age?

Answer

It is not that you become more materialistic in old age, but you become more dependent on emotional support. There is loneliness and as it is at any age, we try to fill the vacuum in our mind with materialistic things. If you are happy in your mind, you don't go after anything. It is when there is a vacuum, when you are not feeling good or when you are feeling bored, that you need something, or some kind of entertainment to keep you busy. In old age the person feels a little isolated or lonely, has nothing to do, and cannot apply the mind to anything creative. Because of that the mind desires these material things. Some old people have a craving for some food and things like that. Sometimes they say that old people act like children; they also want similar things, and have to be taken care of, in a similar way.

Question

How, then, should we deal with old age?

Answer

A person feels insecure in his old age despite living with his family. Perhaps the fear of death is also hovering on the mind. That is the reason why we must prepare for old age and retirement, when we are young. Otherwise, all of a sudden you retire, and suddenly you have nothing with which to fill up those 12 hours. When you are young, you are very busy with many activities. In old age, the body does not co-operate with you and that leads to a lot of frustration. If, in our youth, we remain very active and extroverted, it requires a lot of energy at the level of the body also. As the person gets old that energy is not there, but the mind continues to be an extrovert, and so there is no compatibility between the mind and the body. This creates a conflict. As we progress in our life, we should start abiding more within ourselves. That is where Vedānta and its way of life help us. If our mind is ready, we can spend our time in prayer and contemplation when we have nothing to do, or when there are no demands on us. Then old age can be a blessing; otherwise it may be very difficult to deal with.

Question

We Indians don't talk about death. When we do bring it up, we are advised not to talk about the future. Why?

Answer

Yes. We have been avoiding talking about death right from childhood. Also, we think that it is inauspicious to talk about death. I think there is a fear that if we talk about death, it will happen. The same holds true for accidents too.

Sometimes people take up these discussions at the wrong time. They start talking about car accidents when they are riding in a car, or they start talking about death in front of a dying person. The problem is that these are not the places to talk about accidents or death. You can talk about accidents when you are at home and not in the car. While in a car, some people really get scared if you raise topics such as accidents. It is better not to talk about it with such people. Vedānta talks about death because it is a reality of life. In fact, the Bhaja Govindam is based on death.

Śrī Śaṅkarācārya saw an old man repeating his grammar *sūtras* (aphorisms), and urged him to recite the name of the Lord, *bhajagovindaṃ bhajagovindaṃ govindaṃ bhajamūdhamate*. Worship Govinda, recite his name! Why are you reciting these grammar *sūtras*? *Samprāpte sannihithe kāle nahi nahi rakṣati dukṛuṅkarāṇe*, death will come at the appointed time and then all these grammar *sūtras* are not going help you. The grammar *sūtras* are representative of any form of intellectual pursuit.

When death is upon you, what is there to help you? It is only your inner wealth that is going to come with you, and everything else will remain here. Some external things are necessary in your life, but while you are accumulating these external requirements, you must also prepare for the

eventual condition of death. Nobody can accompany you in your death. Even your wife will go only as far as the doorstep. In India, when a man dies the wife does not go to the crematorium; she does not go out of the house. It is his relatives and friends who go to the cremation ground, and the closest family that goes through the funeral and disposes off the body.

Dharma is the only thing that goes with you. Whatever good that you have done in your life will actually accompany you, and, therefore, be prepared for this journey. When we go on a journey, we take along adequate supplies including food, and whatever else that we may need. Similarly, there is a journey after death too, and there must be preparation for that. The preparation for a journey must be compatible with the destination as well as the path. When you are going to cold places, you naturally need to take woolen clothes. When you go to Chennai, however, you don't need any woolen clothes! Similarly, you should prepare to take what you can carry with you when you die.

There are two kinds of bank accounts. One kind of bank account is where we deposit money; the other is where we deposit God's name. If you keep repeating 'Rām-Rām', or any other name of the Lord, it will be deposited in your bank account. That is the bank account that will come with us. The money bank account is required for us and for our children; that's okay. But it will not come with us. Therefore, while accumulating this money bank account, we should also accumulate the other bank account right now. "No, Swamiji! We are too young now. We will accumulate that bank account when we become old." When you become old, your mind is not available to you. When you try to repeat 'Ram Ram', it runs away someplace else. This

requires vitality. So, when the mind still has the vitality to repeat the Lord's name, do it.

People in India think that Vedānta is for retired people only. “We are too young. Why should we go to the Bhagavad Gītā classes? Or go to an Ashram?” Because of this view, some young people who go to these classes or ashrams actually don't declare where they are going. I remember that when I was young and started going to the Bhagavad Gītā study group, I would not tell my friends where I was going for fear of being ridiculed! “You are going there? What is it, have you become old? Perhaps, there is something wrong with you!” People think that this is something to be done only when you are old or when you retire or when you do not have anything else to do. But, this requires lot of vitality. It requires vitality of the mind and vitality of the intellect.

In fact, Vedānta teaches us how to bring about a transformation of our personality. That requires a lot of resolve and a lot of energy which you have only when you are young. When you become old, your body does not cooperate with you; your mind does not cooperate with you. You want to go somewhere and your mind wants to go somewhere else. Therefore, prepare for old age when you have the energy, and when you are young. Prepare for death when you have the capacity to prepare for it. If you are prepared, death will not be that scary. By avoiding the talk of death, we suffer from the fear of death anyway. We do not want to face it, and therefore there is a fear of death in us all the time. On the other hand, if we understand it and confront it, we find that it is okay. Perhaps there is a fear of pain and suffering that comes along with the thought of death. But there is nothing you can do about it. If it

has to come, we have to be ready for that also. So confronting the situation is much better than avoiding the situation, because you cannot avoid it anyway¹.

¹ Summer 2003 satsang, transcribed and edited by Subbalakshmi Chandrasekaran, Chaya Raj, Jayshree Ramakrishnan and KK Davey.