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Mistakes Are Part of The Spiritual Path

Blunders are, in truth, opportunities to improve our behavior and thereby make spiritual progress

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Since September 11, there have been increased statements by Western leaders condemning some men as being evil and extolling others as being good. This, of course, is not the Hindu perspective. But since it is so common, it is good to take time to reflect on the Hindu point of view regarding good and evil. For those who are parents it is good to discuss the Hindu view with their children, to make sure our and our children's thinking on the matter remains uninfluenced by Western thought.

The Hindu viewpoint is that all of mankind is good, for we are all divine beings, souls created by God. In fact, we are all one family, "Vasudhaiva kutumbakam—the whole

world is one family." Each soul is emanated from God, as a spark from a fire, on a spiritual journey which eventually leads back to God. All human beings are on this journey, whether they realize it or not, and the journey spans many lives. If all are on the same journey, why is there such a disparity between men? Clearly, some act like saints and others act like sinners. Some take delight in helping their fellow men while others delight in harming them. The Hindu explanation is that each of us started the journey at a different time. Thus some are at the beginning of the spiritual path, while others are near the end. In other words, there are young souls and there are old souls. Our paramaguru, Jnanaguru Siva Yogaswami, in speaking to devotees, described life as a school, with some in the M.A. class and others in kindergarten, and to each he gave lessons according to the level of advancement.

Man's nature can be described as three-fold: spiritual, intellectual and instinctive. It is the instinctive nature, the animal-like nature, which contains the tendencies to harm others. Men who are expressing those tendencies are young souls who need to learn to harness this force. The Hindu approach to such a man is not to label him evil, but rather to focus on helping him learn to control his instincts and improve his behavior. Gurudeva, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniaswami, said insightfully: "People act in evil ways who are not yet in touch with their soul nature and live totally in the outer, instinctive mind. What the ignorant see as evil, the enlightened see as the actions of low-minded and immature individuals."

Important insights into the soul's maturing process can be gained by looking at the three shaktis of God Siva—iccha, the power of desire; kriya, the power of action; and jnana, the power of wisdom—which are also the three powers of the soul. We first have a desire, and when the desire becomes strong enough we act. In young souls the action may be ill-conceived, even against dharma. For example, a man wants a computer, so he steals one. Money is needed, so he robs a bank. The soul is often caught up in repeating a cycle of similar experiences, moving back and forth from desire to action, desire to action, until the needed lesson is learned. In the case of the adharmic action of stealing, eventually he will learn the lesson that this is not the best way to acquire possessions. This learning is the jnana shakti, wisdom, causing his behavior to improve.

This process is the same for dharmic actions. Say we are helping out as a volunteer at the temple, teaching children's classes once a month. We like the feeling of helping others in a meaningful way and so decide to help out every week and even participate in regular meetings to plan the classes. We are doing a selfless action, and the reaction it has on us is to feel more inner joy. The jnana is to resolve to do even more service and thus feel more joyful. We have improved our behavior.

A recent segment on television described an innovative prison in California. As we all know, the usual approach is to regard jail simply as a time punishment by confinement for a number of years. Under this approach, many of the prisoners released repeat the same crimes and return to jail again and again. Their behavior shows no improvement. In fact, they may learn the criminal's craft while serving their sentence. In this innovative prison program, the warden had initiated a regimen that included counseling, yoga and other therapeutic activities to improve the behavior of prisoners so they would not repeat their crimes and return to jail. The program is showing an excellent success rate.

For all of mankind, no matter where one is on the path, spiritual advancement comes from improving one's behavior. Said another way, it comes from learning from one's mistakes. Unfortunately, this process is often inhibited by the idea that somehow we are not supposed to make mistakes, that mistakes are bad. We grow up being scolded for our mistakes by our parents. Teachers ridicule students when they make mistakes. Supervisors yell at workers when they make a mistake. No wonder many adults feel terrible when they make a mistake. To spiritually benefit from our mistakes, we need a new attitude toward them. Gurudeva described mistakes as "wonderful opportunities to learn." He compared learning from life's experiences to progressing through the classes at a university. He proclaimed: "Life is a series of experiences, one after another. Each experience can be looked at as a classroom in the big university of life if we only approach it that way. Who is going to these classrooms? Who is the member of this university of life? It's not your instinctive mind. It's not your intellectual mind. It's the body of your soul, your superconscious self, that wonderful body of light. It's maturing under the stress and strain."

Those who are parents can teach their children that making mistakes is not bad. Everyone makes mistakes. It is natural, and simply shows we do not understand something about the matter at hand, or we have been inattentive. It is important for parents to determine what understanding the child lacks and teach it to him without blame or shame. When parents discipline through natural and logical consequences, children are encouraged to learn to reflect on the possible effects of their behavior before acting. Such wisdom can be nurtured through encouraging self-reflection, asking the child to think about what he did and how he could avoid making that mistake again.

A common first reaction to having made a mistake is to become upset, to become

fretful or angry about it, or if it is a serious mistake to become deeply burdened and even depressed. That is a natural first reaction, but if it is our only reaction, it is not enough. To progress, we need to cope with the emotional reaction to the action and move on to the learning stage.

A good second reaction to a mistake is to think clearly about what happened, why it occurred and find a way to not repeat the mistake in the future. Perhaps we were not being careful enough, and simply resolving to be more circumspect next time will prevent the problem from recurring. Perhaps we lacked some important knowledge, and now we have that knowledge, which we can simply resolve to use next time.

Perhaps we created unintended consequences that caused significant problems to us or others. Now that we are aware of the consequences, we certainly won't repeat the action. Those who are striving to live a spiritual life are self-reflective and learn quickly from their blunders. In fact, one way to tell a young soul from an old soul is to observe how quickly he cognizes his error and learns not to repeat the same mistake.

A third remedy may be needed if the misstep involved other people. Perhaps we have hurt someone's feelings or created a strain between us. A direct apology can fix this if we know them well. If we are not close enough to the individual to be able to apologize, a generous act toward them can often adjust the flow of feelings back into a harmonious condition. For example, hold a small dinner party and include them among the guests.

A fourth remedy may be needed if one commits a major misdeed: for example, if we did something that was dishonest. Even if we have resolved to not repeat the misdeed and apologized to those involved, we may still feel guilty about the transgression. By performing some form of penance, prayaschitta, we can rid ourselves of the sense of feeling bad about ourself. Typical forms of penance are fasting, performing 108 prostrations before the Deity or walking prostrations up a sacred path or around a temple.

All of this does not mean we don't punish those who act in evil ways. Societies and nations must protect themselves with appropriate actions that restrain wrongful

behaviors. But even while punishing those who act with malicious intent, let us remember they, too, are souls on the journey of spiritual maturity and discovery. Let the focus be not on categorizing men as good or evil but on encouraging all to improve their behavior, by applying the appropriate remedies and sanctions.