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A Practical and Spiritual Response to the Devastating Asian Tsunami of 2004

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Over the last few weeks, I have been asked by numerous individuals to share some thoughts on the massive global death and destruction caused by the South Asia tsunami that ravaged such a vast part of the world in the last days of 2004. The first and foremost response, of course, is the need to awaken our compassion and offer our prayerful thoughts to those who have passed on and give expression, inwardly and outwardly, to our deep-felt sympathy for the relatives and friends who survived. This is our response from the heart.

The natural second response is to provide practical help as millions face the challenges of the aftermath of this awesome natural catastrophe, the worst in our lifetime. I have noticed a remarkable welling up of such support among devotees of our monastery and the general public in many countries, and seen people go to extraordinary lengths to collect medical supplies, raise funds at work and even offer to fly to the affected areas to provide succor with their own hands. These are life-saving, life-affirming reactions, for without the generous financial and in-kind donations that reach the affected areas, many more could die in the weeks ahead for lack of food, clean water, medical supplies and temporary shelter. This is how we respond with our hands.

In the medium term, communities need to be rebuilt and resources provided to individuals to enable them to resume supporting themselves through their chosen occupation. For the longer term, governments need to ponder the issues of

providing effective warning systems, such as currently exist in the countries in the Pacific Ocean region, to protect their populations against future tsunamis, and to better prepare them for any large-scale disaster, whether from earthquakes, storms, droughts or other threats to security. On all levels, we need to learn from this experience so we will face our next massive threat more prepared. This is our response from the head.

On the philosophical level, major disasters in the world cause everyone to stop and think--think about ourselves, our family, friends, community, nation and the world itself. If our faith is not strong, our thoughts can be of a negative nature. You have heard people wondering aloud why God would allow such a thing to happen, why good people are suffering so, how can there even be a God if such tragedy can occur on Earth? However, if our faith is strong, then our reflections and our reactions remain positive.

From the Hindu point of view, questions of blame and punishment do not arise. God does not punish, does not visit terrible things upon the Earth. It is, after all, His creation. He did give the natural forces on this Earth immense power, yet even these are forces of change and evolution. For Hindus the most terrific of disasters is not some cosmic chastisement, but the rightful unfolding of dharma and destiny. For the devout Hindu, loss and even death, while difficult, are not beyond our ability to accept. After all, our soul is eternal and through its many lives on Earth undergoes a variety of experiences, many joyful, others sorrowful, but it benefits spiritually from all experience, whether seemingly good or bad. However, as Gurudeva, Sivaya Subramuniaswami, said, "Because the fear of death is so much a part of social consciousness today, as ignorance prevails in these matters, sorrow rather than joy is often experienced. In not understanding life in its fullness, many cannot help but misunderstand death. The attitude should be one of joy based on beliefs that come from the knowledge of karma and samsara. Experience of joy and a total release of the loved one would come from a pure understanding of the processes of life. A better word than death is transition, passing into a new form of life--life into life."

My guru's guru, Siva Yogaswami of Jaffna, Sri Lanka, many years ago foresaw the difficult times the peoples of his country have faced for the past two decades of civil war and the loss of 60,000 lives. Now his nation has suffered in one day, December 26, the loss of over 30,000 lives, with one million, fully five percent of the nation, left homeless. This great sage counseled how to cope with such horrific situations in his Natchintanai hymn, "Nalluran Tiruvadi: " "Even if war and famine come and the world is burnt to ashes, shall we know any fear, O Parrot? Arumugam is our refuge."

In other verses Yogaswami stresses that the atma, our soul, is eternal, that Lord Murugan is our protection, and clinging to His holy feet will cause all distress and anguish to disappear. Yogaswami's sagely advice is clear--difficulties are a part of life on this planet and the sorrow they bring can be overcome through the worship of God and the Gods.

In these times, we find solace in the words of the illumined satgurus, whose vision is wider and deeper than our own. Pramukh Swami Maharaj of BAPS counseled his followers in the aftermath of the 2001 Gujarat earthquake: "Natural calamities like earthquakes have been affecting mankind since time immemorial. It is a natural phenomenon, like rain. It is not the wrath of God. So, whatever has to happen, happens. The good and the painful all are a part of life, and we should accept both with equanimity. When people are facing difficulties and sorrows, our Indian tradition is to offer them solace. We feel that by serving the human beings we serve the Lord Himself."

Those with strong faith, when confronting a major disaster such as the recent tsunami, have the ability to step back from life's daily routine and look more deeply at themselves to see if there are changes they could make to add deeper meaning to their life. The physical and psychic power of this tsunami offers such thoughtful people an opportunity to examine and change their own lives, for life-changing moments are rare and are often provoked by something bigger than our day-to-day existence.

Perhaps there are changes we have been considering for years but always end up putting off. Now is the time to implement them. Perhaps there are new patterns of life, new habits, new commitments that can take root at this rare moment in our personal and global history. Perhaps our love for family members needs to be verbalized more often. Now is the moment to begin. Perhaps we have plans to improve our community. Now is the time to set these plans in motion. Perhaps we always wanted to deepen our spiritual efforts and expand our charitable work. Now is the time to make such ideals real. In all these ways, we can take the energy surrounding this historic catastrophe and transmute it into something that benefits our lives and our community, rather than diminishes them. Adversity, faced with courage and wisdom, can bring us one step closer to the Source of All. As Gurudeva would often say, "It matters less what happens to you in life than how you react to all that happens."

In the aftermath of the tsunami, the Western media sought to understand how people of different faiths look upon such disasters. They were trying to be helpful, and they were fair to the Buddhists, Muslims and Christians, but when it came to explaining the Hindu response, Newsweek magazine wrote on January 10 that the Hindu Gods are ambivalent and capricious and that "the ocean itself is a terrible god who eats people and boats..." It is, of course, painful for Hindus to read such misconstrued supposition in the international media, especially as we know how deep is the Vedic perspective on suffering, death and dying. Hindus need to respond, to educate the media, and provoke them toward a truer perception of Hinduism. That means writing letters, informing them that Hindus know there is a purpose in all things in life, not just the good things. We know that God is not vengeful or capricious but an all-knowing, all-loving, all-powerful Father-Mother Creator whose grace is present in our lives each day and whose blessings are palpably felt by those of awakened sensitivity. As my satguru, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, wrote: "There is a divine purpose even in the existence of suffering in the world. Suffering cannot be totally avoided. It is a natural part of human life and the impetus for much spiritual growth for the soul. Knowing this, the wise accept suffering from any source, be it hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, famine, wars, disease or inexplicable tragedies. So also does suffering offer us the important realization that true happiness and freedom cannot be found in the world, for earthly joy is inextricably bound to sorrow, and worldly freedom to bondage."

The great Hindu saints all teach us that even harsh karma, when faced in wisdom, can be a catalyst for spiritual advancement. No one welcomes suffering into their lives, but when it comes we can choose how to respond. We can allow it to diminish our life or to strengthen and deepen it. That power lies in each one's hands. We see such resolve in the faces of those who lost loved ones, and yet set about the enormous task of rebuilding their lives. We see it in the global outpouring of compassion and help, a love and shared sympathy that brought the world together for a moment in time, that transcended race and geography, religion and history. While 2004 saw the greatest natural disaster in memory, 2005 is unfolding history's greatest outpouring of compassionate help. The world does seem a little less divided now, as we reach out to one another in a thousand ways.

A moving story provides a glimpse into the human spirit, and the possibility of enormous good flooding out from this calamity. On January 13 National Public Radio reported on the experience of a Los Angeles fireman who was in Sri Lanka helping in the initial relief efforts. He was used to human loss, that being part of a fireman's daily experience, but this was different. The fireman shared that a Sri Lankan man approached him, amid all of the debris and chaos. He had just lost his entire family, and most of his home. Yet that victim greeted him with a smile and offered the fireman a cup of tea. The fireman was deeply struck by this, his first

person-to-person encounter with an Easterner. He wondered how a man who suddenly had nothing and must certainly have been filled with sadness and loneliness was offering his rescuers tea, thinking more of them than of himself. He took it as a sign of the resilience of the human spirit and of the East's unique reply to loss and its special capacity to endure.