

Ahimsa - Nonviolence

I was asked to speak to you on nonviolence, one of the five basic human values. I would like to tell you a wonderful story from the Indian classics, whose principal theme is nonviolence. But first, let us take a moment to look at the level in which all these values operate. They are called human values because they are peculiar to human beings. What distinguishes a human being, among the vast range of living things? Man is called homo sapiens, the wise one, because his *buddhi* is awakened and functional. It is not his mind, but his *buddhi*, which distinguishes him from the other creatures. All living beings have physical bodies, all have the vital life breath, all the animals have minds in various stages of development. These refer to the three lower *koshas*, or sheaths, and they principally have to do with the survival of the organism.

Survival often involves struggle, and struggle often involves violence. But, unique to the human species, is the development of a higher and finer *kosha*, the fourth sheath, the *buddhi*, which is the intuitive intellect or the higher mind. Unlike the lower, it is not concerned with survival. Its principal concern is the return to unity consciousness. Its modus operandi is peace, love and nonviolence. Like a delicate flower it must awaken, it must blossom. The soil must have been prepared, the seed must have been sown, the seedling must have been tended and cared for, the choking weeds must have been removed, and the time and conditions must be right, then the season for its awakening comes. And when it comes, it usually comes like a flash and the being becomes totally transformed. The earthbound caterpillar transforms itself into the free and unbound butterfly.

When that propitious moment comes, after lifetimes of bondage to the lower, non-human dimensions of living, (even though it may have been in human form), then we speak of that splendid moment of transition as **grace**. It is the glorious dawning of the inner light, that we evoke with our *sadhana*, such as for example, the *gayatri mantra*. But grace cannot be limited. The awakening can come to the most unlikely of all spiritual candidates. Here is a story that speaks of such an awakening. This story brings out the value of nonviolence, as an important factor accompanying that awakening process.

Long ago there lived a huntsman in a thick forest. He lived on the wild animals which he killed with the use of his bow. Once every few months he would wend his way out of the jungle to a town on the edge of the forest and there he would trade his deer skins for some of the provisions of civilization, such as oil for his lamps at night, sugar, flour and salt. and other such things. His best customers for his skins were the priests and the faithful who frequented the large Shiva temple in the town, for they would use the skins to cover the ground under them whenever they sat for worship and meditation. So, when he came out of the jungle with his skins, he would go straight to the Shiva temple and sit outside until somebody came and offered him something useful in exchange for them.

One particular time when he came it was *mahashivaratri*, the day of the year when the moon, which represents the mind, is the thinnest of slivers. That day is dedicated to the great Lord Shiva. Unaware of the auspicious day, the huntsman sat down as usual outside the temple. Inside the worshippers were singing the *bhajans* and *kirtans* in praise of the Lord, and performing various acts of worship, in a most melodious and devotional way. The service inside the temple went on like this hour after hour and this simple

man's heart, sitting outside as he was, could not help but be stirred in a very deep and moving way.

Wondering when the devout would finally come out he would go to the door of the temple and peek in. In this way, not only did he hear the sweet songs in praise of the Lord, but he also had the *darshan* of the image of the Lord, and soon a great warmth grew within him, and he became lost in the beauty of the music and the vision of the idol. He hardly realized that the whole day had passed and he still had not disposed of even one of his skins. It was evening, and he found himself very hungry, and for the first time that day, he started thinking about food, realizing that soon he would become weak from lack of food. Leaving his skins near the door of the temple he set out at dusk to find some animal for food.

Quite unknowingly, he had observed the *shivaratri* fast that day. Now, seeking food, he spied a small water-hole, and he climbed a nearby tree on its edge, awaiting some animal that would come there to slake its thirst. To help him see in the night, he plucked off some of the boughs and leaves of that tree. He didn't realize that this was a *bilva* tree, the most sacred tree dear to Lord Shiva, and the leaves that he let fall, fell on a *shivalingam* that had been installed at the base of this tree. Of course, he never realized the great blessing that had been bestowed on him by the Lord, to have the chance to visit a Shiva temple on *mahashivaratri*, to be able to fast and be immersed in the holy vibrations of worship of the great Lord all day, and now, to place *bilva* leaves on a *shivalingam*.

When the first quarter of the holy night was drawing to a close, a fat deer came slowly to the water-hole. The huntsman set his aim, but he was surprised when the deer spoke to him. His heart had softened much during this day, so he listened patiently without anger. "O merciful man, I am about to deliver my calf. Already I can feel the labor pains. Allow me to go back to my herd and give birth there and entrust my little baby to some sister's care. Then I will come back to this very place and you can kill me and feed your fill."

But, how could the huntsman believe her words? She was obviously trying to escape his arrow. So he asked her "How can I trust you and let you go? Whoever will come back willingly to be killed after once having escaped death?" Then the deer said, "Listen. I shall take an oath, for there is nothing greater than the sworn word. If I do not return as promised may I suffer hell like the youth who ill-treats his parents, or the student who wont listen to his teachers and who sleeps in class, or the thief who robs others. May I suffer the agony into which these fall who give pain to others, if I do not come to be killed by you when dawn breaks."

The huntsman allowed her to go unharmed. He heard the distant sounds of conches blown in the Shiva temple and he felt a wonderful warmth within himself that seemed to completely dispel his hunger. Still he kept a careful vigil lest another deer comes and goes unnoticed, and he continued to pluck leaves to make a clear view for himself, and the leaves continued to rain down and fall on the *shivalingam* below.

Towards the end of the second quarter of the night, another deer came down to the water and the huntsman strung his bow. This deer also spoke to him, very sweetly, "Listen, huntsman. You must have already killed my dear sister who is pregnant and who usually comes to drink at this place. She started before me. Tell me the truth, has

she met death at your hands?" The huntsman replied that he had allowed her to go after she promised under strict oath that she would return later to be killed by him. I am suffering from great hunger and I cannot dally any longer. Get ready to meet your end."

But the deer implored, "Please, let me return to the herd and look after my little ones and put them in good care." Just then, a little baby doe came skipping out of the jungle and started suckling on this mother-deer. "Is it moral to kill a mother with a suckling child? Stay. I shall give this kid to be nursed by some sister and I will have them look after the other young ones also, and then I shall come back at dawn." "Declare it on oath," said the man whose heart melted at her plight. "May I suffer the calamities that visit a wife when she cheats her husband, or a servant when he cheats his master, or a child when he cheats his parents, or a hypocrite when he cheats the Lord." He let her go and nuzzling her baby, she left.

Soon the third quarter of the sacred night drew towards its end. He continued to spend it in vigil, fasting, listening to the temple bells and dropping *bilva* leaves. He was being transmuted internally by his unsuspecting *sadhana* and by the declarations and oaths of the deers. Suddenly a big male deer with magnificent antlers came into view in the starry sky. When he aimed his deadly arrow, this deer also spoke up. It said, "Stay! You have killed my two consorts and yet you need me?" The huntsman said, "No, I let them go; they come at dawn, if what they swore is true."

"I, too, shall come at dawn," replied the big buck, "for I am the leader of the herd and they all look to me for direction. I am the one who teaches them everything. Now I must return and put one of my kinsmen in my place and see to it that everyone is taken care of, particularly all the young. Then, I will certainly return here at dawn and you can have this body for your meal. I shall take this oath: May I get on my head the suffering that befalls the sinner who sleeps after sunrise or the grief that visits a Vishnu follower who slanders a worshipper of Shiva, or a Shiva follower who slanders a devotee of Vishnu, or one who does not worship at all. The huntsman felt that the oath was sufficiently binding and let him go.

The fourth quarter too came on and was about to end. He continued his unplanned vigil and fast, softly humming the melodies to himself of the devotional songs to the Lord, which were wafting in to his forest hideaway from the temple some miles away. And thus, quite involuntarily, he was doing the *puja* that millions were engaging in voluntarily that night. Now, the clouds on the eastern horizon were becoming fringed with golden splendor and dawn was about to break. There was still a vestige of desire left in the huntsman's heart, when yet a fourth deer presented itself. As he fitted his arrow to his bow, the deer looked up with a benign smile on its face, and in a totally unafraid voice blessed the huntsman that he have a long and happy life. And the deer also assured the huntsman that he need have no feelings of remorse in killing her and eating her flesh, because she freely offered herself to him as a sacrifice and gift on this holy occasion, and no sin would come on him. Having said this, she knelt down and lowered her head and made herself ready to receive the arrow.

Just then the first deer bounded in, having returned after giving birth to her baby, and cried out, "No, don't shoot her! I have given my word to return and offer myself to your arrow. Please spare her. She is pure and innocent. Here, shoot me instead!" Then the

second deer came and said, "My sister here has just given birth. Her baby will never know her mother. Mine are old enough to fend for themselves; please take me!" Then the buck darted in and with his big body put himself in front of the other three, saying, "My time is naturally coming to an end. These are all helpless creatures who don't deserve to die, but I have fought many a battle and have lived a full life and my body is filled with strong muscle and plenty of fat to make many full meals for you and your family. Please shoot me and let these consorts of mine go. Or, if you must take them, then at least shoot me first," prayed the big male.

All of them were now standing by the *shivalingam* under the sacred *bilva* tree, waiting peacefully for the huntsman's decision. The huntsman shed tears of repentance. He condemned himself for his wickedness and fell at the feet of the amazed deers. "Dear brother! Dearest sisters! Please forgive me!" he exclaimed, "You have saved me! You have wiped away my ignorance and sin. I take this oath in your presence," he said, breaking his bow, "I will never kill again!"

Then he heard a voice from heaven proclaim: "O huntsman! You have become pure by repentance and renunciation and the faith you placed in the sincere vows of these sacred deers. You have fasted, you have observed vigil on this holy day of *shivaratri*, you have placed *bilva* leaves on the *lingam*, you have granted a lease of life to these animals. Now, I bless you with my grace and I confer a boon on you that when you leave this form you will be forever remembered, for you will shine as a great star in the sky, so that all men will know of your virtues."

Then a brilliant inner light flooded his being. Overwhelmed by the radiance, he sat down in front of the *lingam* under the *bilva* tree to contemplate that glorious light. And it was there, that some devotees returning to their homes from their all-night *shivaratri* vigil, found him, utterly still, totally absorbed within himself. A luminous glow surrounded him, as he sat there. Quickly the word went out that a great *mahatma*, disguised in the simple dress of a low-caste hunter, had come into the area and was meditating at the site of the *bilva* tree and the *shivalingam* in the forest. The townspeople came with offerings of fruit and articles of worship, and did everything possible to make this high-souled sage feel welcome and stay among them.

He remained there and was looked after and revered for the remainder of his life. When he left his body he rose to the heavens to shine as a great star, surrounded by the four deer, who also shone as stars. Together they make up the center cluster of a mighty constellation in the skies, And even today in the February sky, we can see them as the beautiful constellation of Orion, looking down upon all mankind, exhorting them to pity, to peacefulness and compassion, to keeping the plighted word, and to worship God, knowingly or unknowingly, with whatever one is engaged in doing.

Swami says, "My grace comes like a flash. You must always be ready. When you least expect, I act." In the case of this low huntsman, the seeds had been planted and tended. When the preparation for his transformation was complete, the divinity made its move, and quite unexpectedly grace descended. And so, this seemingly ordinary man was elevated to the highest. Through his story, we can be inspired to live the universal message of nonviolence and love for all beings.