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VIEWPOINT

Joy and Sorrow

Swami Tyagananda
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THE United Ministries at Harvard is an interfaith coalition of forty chaplains representing twenty-nine ministries; twenty-one of these are Christian from various denominations, two are Jewish, and there is one each from Hindu, Buddhist, Humanist, Islamic, and Zoroastrian traditions. It is a vibrant group and there is much collegiality among the chaplains. As the Hindu chaplain at Harvard, I deeply value not only the friendship that we share in the group but also the opportunities I get to meet and learn from authentic representatives so many spiritual traditions.

Our meeting in November 2004 was held soon after the historic win of the Red Sox in the World Series. The fans in Boston had gone crazy with joy that expressed itself also, sadly, in vandalization and the resultant death of a student from a fatal encounter with the police. In his opening presidential remarks, our Methodist chaplain said almost casually what I later felt to be a profound observation. With a wry smile he said that while the religions of the world provide enough tools to help us deal with pain and sorrow, he was not sure whether they had

much to say about how we should deal with joy.

That set me thinking about joy and sorrow—and what follow are a few thoughts that have been running through my mind since then. It seems to me that conversations on how joy and sorrow are understood across religious boundaries would be immensely productive and helpful both academically and practically.

It is possible to say that there are two types of joys and sorrows. One type is existential and the other type is temporal. Temporal pain and sorrow can result from any of the factors such as lack of shelter, food or clothing, lack of education, loss of a job or power or position, betrayal by a friend, and so on. The two main characteristics of temporal pain are (1) it is not universal, that is to say, not everyone in the world suffers from every one of these temporal forms, and (2) temporal pain, no matter how intense, can be removed. It may take time and much effort but still there are ways to overcome it.

Temporal joys can result from any of the factors such as friendship, love, the

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fulfillment of a longstanding desire, financial gain, and acquisition of power. Temporal joys have similar two characteristics: (1) they are not universal, that is to say, not everyone in the world has every one of these joys, and (2) each of these temporal joys waxes and wanes, and it does end at some time. None of these is eternal and none of these is constant.

Our whole life can end up shuttling between the two experiences: temporal sorrow and temporal joy. The trouble is that they always follow each other. They form a package. We would like to have unending joy and be permanently free from sorrow. But that is just not possible. We cannot have just one of them. We either take—or reject—both. If we take both, our life will go on pretty much the way it has so far, a ride with its joy-ups and sorrow-downs. If we are brave enough to reject both and explore other possibilities, we become aware of the existential forms of joy and sorrow.

I am using the word “existential” here not in a philosophical sense but in a very literal way. By existential I mean that these are a part of our very existence as human beings. They are intrinsic to us. We cannot separate them from our human identity. The characteristics of these intrinsic forms are: (1) they are universal, that is to say, every human being is entitled to them, and (2) they cannot be overcome easily, because they are inherent in our existence.

At least three forms of intrinsic sorrow come immediately to mind and all of them relate to the body: illness, old age, and death. Add to these other varieties such the experience of anxiety, stress and fear. No one is exempt from these. Intrinsic sorrow is connected with our existence as human beings; intrinsic joy is connected with our existence as spiritual beings. Is there a way to transcend our humanity and touch the core of our divinity? When we look deeply into the temporal nature of our joys and sorrows, we become aware of the intrinsic sorrow enveloping our human situation. Only with this awareness and the longing to overcome the sorrow does a person’s spiritual quest begin in the real sense.

Intrinsic sorrow vanishes when we begin to experience intrinsic joy. Nothing in the world and no one in this world can give us intrinsic joy. It does not come from outside. It comes from inside. It comes from our encountering the core of our existence, when we get in touch with our true identity, which is defined in different ways by different religions. Thus, it is possible, for instance, to say that when a person has a true experience of God and sees herself or himself as a child of God, then that person experiences intrinsic joy—a joy that is one with her or his existence as God’s child. It’s a joy that no one can take away from him or her.

Using Vedantic terms, intrinsic joy can also be understood in terms of realizing one’s identity as the Atman. The intrinsic joy belongs to the Atman and intrinsic sorrow belongs to body/mind. So long as my “I” feels its identity with body/mind, the sorrows connected with body/mind are “my” sorrows. When my “I” is identified with the Atman, the bliss connected with the Atman is “my” joy. Well, it is more than “my” joy. I am the joy, period.

Even a fleeting taste of that joy of God is enough for us to see through the limitations of all temporal joys and sorrows. The best way to handle all of our joys and sorrows in daily life is to focus our energies in seeking the joy that comes from God. It is a joy that is like no other. It is the joy that “passeth understanding.”