

The Importance of ‘Final Moments of Life’

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As people approach retirement, they start thinking about the inevitable possibility of stopping the routine of attending the office every day. As the D-day approaches, this thought slowly overtakes them and they begin to contemplate on what must be their parting message to the colleagues. They also think in terms of what next? For all we know, many of us going through this stage of life eventually end up taking up some assignment either as gainful employment or as service to the society in some ways. In that sense, it is not a “black hole” and a clueless future. Despite this, imagine how much of thinking goes behind this. If this is the case, what about our retirement from this “life”?

Retirement from “this life”

After a child is born, the parents and the relatives closely observe the child and often comment, “the child has grown since I saw her last”. If we pause for a moment and objectively look at the situation we may realise that we have a faulty understanding of the reality. Anyone born in this world can only shrink and not grow! This statement needs some clarification as it sounds counter-intuitive. Think of somebody who lived for 100 years. This would mean that on the day the person was born, he/she was left with 36,525 days of life. On the next day he/she had only 36,524 days to live and so on. Viewed in this manner, the proverbial growing is indeed shrinking only.

Although at the outset it may sound pessimistic, the fact of life is that everyone born in this world have to go away one day. Despite this crude reality, nobody wants to think about death. More so, nobody wants to think about one’s own dying moments. We either assume that we have no wherewithal to think or we are paranoid about this. Therefore, it appears that the best course of action is to push it under the carpet and somehow become forgetful of this.

Avoiding this subject matter is a response arising out of being sentimental and emotional. However, it is not a sensible idea at all as this possibility is going to eventually appear in our horizon. On the other hand, if we understand the issues better and prepare ourselves for it, the fear will be replaced with clarity and the life that we are living will become more focused and purposeful. To endow us with this understanding Shri Krishna has a set of *ślokas* in chapter 8. We shall see two of them in this write up.

The Importance of the Final Moments of One’s Life

Shri Krishna wants to first establish the importance of thinking of one’s final moments. Therefore he observes that whatever (*yaṃ yaṃ vāpi*) be the thought (*smaran-bhāvaṃ*) with which a person gives up (*tyajaty*) his body (*kalevaram*) in the final moments (*ante*), that person will indeed attain (*evaiti*) that stage and will be always (*sadā*) characterised (*tadbhāva*) by that thought (*bhāvitah*).

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यं यं वापि स्मरन्भावं त्यजत्यन्ते कलेवरम् ।

तं तमेवैति कौन्तेय सदा तद्भावं भावितः ॥ 8.06

*yaṃ yaṃ vāpi smaran-bhāvaṃ tyajaty-ante kalevaram,
taṃ tam-evaiti kaunteya sadā tadbhāva-bhāvitaḥ.*

This is an important point to be understood. This is perhaps the reason, Jaṭa Bharata was thinking of the deer all the time including his final moment and therefore was born as a deer in the next birth. If we extend this logic, someone thinking about the wealth that he/she is going to leave behind will end up taking up a role related to guarding the wealth. Similarly, someone thinking all the time about the son/daughter without a job will end up playing a role of facilitating job for people in the next avatar.

Should we dismiss all these as fantasy, wild imagination and unscientific? The answer to this lies in our ways of handling certain issues in life where we have no knowledge. For instance, if someone has a chest pain and goes to a doctor, the doctor after examining the person may advise that the heart be tore opened and repaired. The person may blindly believe this and accept the advice. At most he/she may go to one or two similar people and finally listen to them. It is risky and foolish to make one's own judgement in this matter as the required knowledge is simply not available with the patient. In all such matters, "faith" is a great enabler.

None of us know what happens after death because the normal faculty of thinking, analysis, inference, judgment etc. are not available for a dead person. In such cases the only sensible method available is to "blindly" listen to someone who we feel is more informed or perhaps knower of the fact that we do not have. In our tradition, we also have faith on the vedic scriptures and take them as the reference for our guidance on matters where we cannot make a judgment. This is nothing unusual and it is the only available means for human beings to solve such unknowns. Therefore, Shri Krishna's words of wisdom in this matter are valuable.

If the final thoughts determine our future trajectory, what could be a desirable final thought that one can aspire for? Shri Krishna clarifies this point in another *śloka*. Shri Krishna says that such of those (*yaḥ*) who even in their final moments (*anta-kāle ca*) give up their body (*muktvā kalevaram*) thinking of me alone (*mām eva smaran*) and leave this world (*prayāti*), such a person (*saḥ*) reaches unto me (*madbhāvaṃ yāti*). To make it unambiguous he says there is no doubt in this (*nāstyatra saṃśayaḥ*).

अन्तकाले च मामेव स्मरन्मुक्त्वा कलेवरम् ।

यः प्रयाति स मद्भावं याति नास्त्यत्र संशयः ॥ 8.05

*anta-kāle ca mām-eva smaran-muktvā kalevaram,
yaḥ prayāti sa madbhāvaṃ yāti nāstyatra saṃśayaḥ.*

There are two aspects to be noticed in this statement. First is the use of the term "even in the final moments". By this we are able to infer that thinking of the God can be a habit for a person and therefore, it may have been a natural thought that might crop up in the last moments of one's life. The other is the assurance by Shri Krishna by dispelling any doubts that we may have.

Preparing for the Grand Finale

The above *slokas* are pointing to an important implication for us. Invariably, what comes to our mind during the final moments will be the issues that we frequently think about in our mind. Only such thoughts that are constantly in our memory have a greater chance to recall during the final moment. Therefore, it calls for cultivation of certain type of thoughts consciously and in a continuous fashion. The thoughts that we will carry is a function of the ambience that we have, the context for our daily life, the company that we keep, the people we meet, the issues that we face and the manner in which we handle these. In other words, our chosen life style and priorities will significantly influence our thought process. We need to pay attention to these matters quite seriously.

In modern parlance we use phrases such as positive psychology to indicate how we can have healthy thoughts. It is mainly used to develop optimism in life and individual happiness. But what is required is more than this. It is about a constant feeling of divinity. One way to develop this is to see divinity in everything that we come across and experience in our life.