

Artha Forum @ Singapore

Date: 13th April, 2014

Speaker: HH Bhakti Rasamrita Swami

Topic: Spirituality and Worldly Success – Shall the Twain Ever Meet?

I was asked to speak on the topic, spirituality and worldly success – shall the twain ever meet? -
A topic that certainly insights some curious thoughts.

Not the least because people think they are indeed spiritually opposed, Because people think of spirituality and material success as incompatible , or being something that can't exist with each other. In other words there is a conception that if you are spiritual then u can't be successful in this world. And if you are successful it means you are not spiritual. And so deeply ingrained is this idea that we do come across people who accost us in different ways with inquiries. Like this one gentleman who approached me. You see gentlemen, people in India feel that those who become mendicants or sadhus in India, they have probably failed. They probably couldn't make it in their life in this world, and probably it's a path of escapism. They could not face the challenges of the world. They were not up to facing the stresses of life. They weren't competent enough or qualified enough to deal with the world. They just want an easy way out. To fulfill the belly. And this conception may not be entirely without foundation, but maybe some people do that, but that becomes a principle that seems to be ingrained in the minds of people as something that is all encompassing.

But factually there are many people who take to spiritual life out of conviction, and not necessarily because they cannot deal with the challenges of the world.

So in any case because many people in this gentleman's experience had taken to this kind of life or perhaps were not educated in the way that we expect people to be educated in this world. So he came up to me and said, I'd like to speak to you something in private . So I said, yes sure , there is no private and public distinction for me, our private and public life is the same for us . So he sat me down and said with genuine empathy in his voice. 'Look I really feel for you, was

there some problem in your life? Was there some tragedy? Was it some lady?' Meaning which thereby was there some real tragedy in my life because of which I took to this spiritual path.

So I laughed heartily and assured him that wasn't the case. But when I read this topic I was reminded of this incident, because people think that if you take to spiritual life, really you are unfit to take on any work in this world. And you will not definitely be successful.

So when we speak on this topic about spirituality and material success, lets first identify what these two terms really mean?

Spirituality is a term that brings out different images in our mind. Some people may think of it as being a particular religious path, or being very philosophically inclined, or some people may think of it as being a set of rituals. Rituals no doubt are very important in life. But when one goes beyond ritual, to understand the principle of ritual, then one comes to 'spi'-ritual (spiritual).

Spirituality in very simple terms is that process, that attitude, that thinking, that leads to harmonious living. That leads to a very wholesome condition of life. By wholesome it means that, one that is truly beneficial for oneself and others. Spirituality is a way of life that leads us on to discover our true nature and potential. Essentially we are all spiritual beings. We are all covered by this material body and this material body has lots of variety, according to gender, community, ethnicity, nationality and various other sizes and shapes by which we can distinguish each other.

But that is not the real us. The ancient literature from India, the Bhagvad Gita , teaches us this very fundamental principle - that we are not this body . That we are essentially spiritual entities. We may call it the soul, the atma. That is the real us. Presently we happened to be engaged in some temporary situation within a given material body. But this is not going to last. It will be there only for a while. When death comes we will move on to another destination, another new avenue opens up, another universe opens up for us. So spirituality is our nature. Spirituality is

our essence. We are spiritual beings. As you've heard the saying before - *'We are not human beings with a spiritual experience but we are spiritual beings undergoing the human experience now.'*

In other words, fundamentally we are spiritual, and as long as we don't recognize our own spirituality, there will be no question of harmony, there will be no question of equilibrium and balance. And indeed I may go as far as to say, that there is no question of sanity in this world. So spirituality is that way of life, which basically brings us back to our own original nature. We go back to what we actually are. So it is not an artificial imposition. It is not something external that we want to imbibe. It's something internal that we want to bring out .

It's interesting that the word 'education' come from the Latin word "educare" which means to bring out what is within. And I thought that was a very interesting understanding of the term because even in the western world , not even India - which is the land of spirituality , this idea that education is bringing out our spiritual nature is very much part of our thinking process in the world .

So the process of education is only equated with getting a degree from a university, or how eligible one becomes in the job market. But that really is not the essence of a good education. Education refers to the formation of character, to the creation of values, to the creation of proper attitudes, and to actually bringing out our spirituality that is innate. That is something intrinsic in our life. So this spirituality is a very mystical thing. And that is what we need to deal with, in our order to be actually successful in our life.

Coming to the topic of success, what really is success? Suppose someone tells us, that you can become a multi billionaire, but only for one second. That doesn't make much sense. Because you are back to what you were before after that one second. So that kind of temporary success is not really a feeling. So true success really, is that which lasts, that which sustains, which is wholesome, which brings happiness, harmony in everybody's life .

Today we see a search for success which at best can be said to be material. Very rarely we find people who strive for spiritual success. Success is equated with earning money, having a big

house, many cars, perhaps living a flashy lifestyle, having prestige, having power. So these are the conceptions of success when we think of this term. But really speaking, success is not any of these things because something can be successful only when it brings you happiness. If success brings you misery, brings you disheartening, then is it really success?

What are the criteria that we are going to use to determine what success is and what isn't? By material standards today, the world has moved ahead and made rampant strides in all forms of economics, commerce, technology, science and so on. Let us look at it very deeply, are we really the happier for it. Material standards and quality of life may have improved and technology that makes life apparently easier, but we see the paradox, life become harder and harder in the search for making our lives easier. No matter what technology we have, life just seems to be harder; the struggle seems to be getting harder and harder. This is the paradox; in the midst of plenty we are miserable.

I'd like to tell you about some survey that was done some years ago and I found it very interesting and illuminating. In one country, I think Germany; they asked people, what the greatest problem in their life is. And majority of people said, that their basic problem was loneliness. In Australia they did a similar study, what is the greatest fear or problem in your life? And the most common answer was the fear of losing one's spouse or partner. This is was the fear in their life that prevented them from leading a wholesome life. In Japan there are suicides happening almost every other minute, especially in the younger generation. In the 12th or 13th consecutive year, they have 20 -30 thousand suicides annually.

There are many other surveys like this, and when you travel across the world, and especially I think now the incidence of mental health problems are increasingly rapidly. Even in the western countries where there is so much affluence, where there is so much technology and where everything works materially. One psychologist was telling me that in UK, every 2nd or 3rd person has mental health issues. That is an astonishing figure, really staggering!

So this makes the question, where is our society going? We have so much success, science and technology as never before, while it has done some good also, the point I'm trying to make is

that in our search for development, have we missed the point somewhere? Has this crucial thing for which we have strived for development & progress, has this crucial thing called happiness slipped through our fingers? What is that elusive thing called happiness that we are looking for but we are not finding despite all the wealth that we have.

Another favorite quote is of one gentleman some years ago, who was listed as the 4th richest person in the world. And his fortune was so large that you couldn't calculate it at any given point in time because by the time you finished the calculation, his wealth had increased again. There was a TV interview with this man, and after asking all the worldly questions, the interviewer asked him, 'If God were to appear in front of you, what would you ask of him?' He thought for a moment and he said - '*a little happiness*'. Meaning that he did not even have a little happiness! He even thought that asking for a lot of happiness is too much. So maybe if he asked just for a little happiness, that it is within some possibility. 4th richest man in the world knows no happiness.

Some of the most "beautiful" people of this world, the "wealthiest", "most famous" who have attained the pinnacle of success have had catastrophic ends. Many of them have committed suicide, or died of substance abuse and so on. Why? Despite such adoration, worship, people going mad over them, willing to give anything for a moment with them. Within there is an emptiness.

So then the question arises, success at what price? What are we seeking really? Success brings many things with it. It brings money, fame, power, prestige, and influence over other people. But I would beg to suggest today, that even though failure maybe hard to handle, success is even harder to handle. Many people handle failure with some ease, or even if it was difficult, they manage to cope with sheer determination and help from their friends. But success is not easy to handle, it is very difficult. I think it was Churchill or somebody else who said, many people can handle adversity, but to test a man's character, give him power. So when power comes in the hand of someone, because of the success it can be absolutely intoxicating.

I was reading a little bit about the history of China, and the wives of the one of rulers, made a quote - that people of this world are mad about sex because they haven't tasted power. Power can be such an intoxicant. Success can be such an intoxicant, that it drives people beyond the realm of sanity. So therefore the most successful people are at risk. And if one has attained success but has remaining humble, with their feet on the ground, then that is truly exceptional. Such a person is definitely worth being praised to the skies.

So if material success has to become something wholesome, something that is beneficial and favorable for the whole world, it must be rooted in spirituality. A person who is successful, but does not have the tools and the wherewithal, intellectual and spiritual technology so to speak, to deal with that success will eventually end up creating an unbeneficial situation for everyone in the world. Because that person will be driven by the lower emotions of greed, pride, envy, lust and so on. When one is driven by these lower emotions one cannot do well to oneself and to others. But when one is driven by higher modes, higher motivators, then actually one does well for oneself and others.

There are different reasons why people work in life. At one level, the lowest level, people perform activity out of fear. Fear of punishment, some reaction, some pain, fear of something undesirable. Let's say we want to skip the red light, but out of fear, we stay back, because we fear the punishment or ticket we get out of that. Higher than that is when we want to work out of sense of reward. Because we aspire for some material benefit in return for our energy, for our activity. That is something which is commonly understood and is very prevalent across the world and is natural. At a higher level than that is when one acts out of a sense of duty, whether the reward comes or not. One is dutiful to the discharge of one's responsibilities. And highest is one who acts out of genuine love. This is what our scriptures say.

Now where do we stand? Who is the most successful person? A person driven by fear? By greed? Can they really do much good for others? No. Not even to them. At the very least our spirituality begins when we work out of a sense of duty. That is spirituality at a neutral level. One has at least begun to understand some higher conception than this kind of selfishness. One understands that in this world one has to work in a detached spirit. This according to Bhagavad

Gita is the preliminary yogi. A yogi is not necessarily one who sits in the Himalayas in meditation with matted locks of hair performing austerities. Or in a stereo type picture, who sits on a bed of nails. But anyone, even in Singapore, working in a big corporation, or a big entrepreneur can also be a yogi. If that person is working in a sense of detachment, out of a sense of duty.

And the highest is when our spirituality blossoms to such a degree that now we only want to act out of love for everybody without distinction. No sectarianism, we see the world as one, as our family.

There is a Sanskrit verse that I would like to quote “aham vijayam karuna”. The meaning is that there are some people who think in terms of I, me and mine. This is mine and distinguishes things from what is his and what is someone else’s. And aspires for that person’s wealth, or that person’s power or prestige. And automatically that leads to envy of another successful person. It is very hard for a person who is not spiritual to be unaffected negatively by another person’s success. Immediately there is a certain sensation that tells us, why not me, why him? It’s a natural feeling unless one is genuinely developed in spirituality. So people who are like this, i.e. I, me and mine, their consciousness is shrunken, they have very narrow minds. On the other hand someone who thinks with a broad vision, his thinking is broad and noble; he says the whole world is my family. So in that position of love, can only come about when the divinity, the spirituality is brought out. Then every single action we do, every single word we speak, will be for the benefit of ourselves and others around us. Even actions performed unknowingly on that stage of spiritual development will be beneficial. This is where spirituality reaches its pinnacle. And in that stage of spiritual development, one will only work for the welfare of others.

One may at lower spiritual levels, have noble intention, but noble intentions are not sufficient. They are necessary but not sufficient. Along with noble intentions one needs knowledge and one needs spiritual maturity. For eg: I see a person lying on the street, he was riding a scooter and was in an accident. And I get out of my car and try to help him. I have a very noble intention. And then I try to do a medical procedure on him, even though I am not a doctor and

actually end up killing him . My intention was not to kill him, but I should have done the right thing. I should have taken him to medical professional. So even though I had a good intention, but because of lack of knowledge I ended up doing the opposite.

So similarly in this world there are many people who are well intentioned, good hearted people , who want to do good for others as well. But there is a lack of spiritual understanding, lack of spiritual depth. Because one is not able to distinguish what is beneficial and what is not. Because one tends to think of 'beneficial' in material terms. And that as we have seen in not necessarily the criteria for happiness. So we may not actually end doing any real good to others.

So at the height of our spiritual development, when we work out of love, we care for everybody. We don't become jealous of anybody's success rather we become happy for their success. And we feel pained of another's failure. And we are driven in this way to make the world a truly happy place. Now imagine if the world was filled with people like this. What a wonderful place it would be. Yes it is a kind of Utopian idea that I am proposing, but everything starts with an aspiration, an ideal. A person is known for his or hers aspirations. When you ask someone, what is your aspiration in life, you size up that person according to what he or she might say. Immediately you fit that person in mould and say, yes now I know what this person is all about. So what is our aspiration? if our aspiration is something ideal , something beautiful , something sublime , even though it may be very hard to attain but that distinguishes us from those who are simply working for selfish motives. So real success therefore is making people happy. And what is happiness? Happiness is not of this world. Happiness is not simply that which pertains to this material body. The general conception of happiness is that, I'll just give people some money, some material security, material pleasure and that will make people happy. But unfortunately, it doesn't work like that.

Imagine there is a fish, and you take him out of the water and put in him a nice BMW, the latest model with all sort of gadgets and so on, is the fish going to be happy? No. All the fish needs is to be placed back into the water. The fish is happy enough without a BMW, the latest clothes, or gadgets. Why so? Because the water is a natural constitution of environment for the fish. The fish doesn't need anything more than the water.

Similarly as spiritual beings, we all need our natural spiritual atmosphere. It is only in that spiritual atmosphere that we can become happy and that happiness is the criterion of our success. If we are devoid of spirituality, no matter what we may achieve on the material platform, no matter how wealthy or sophisticated we might be, there will always be a missing element. Something is missing. Otherwise why would we have so much chaos in the world? It's not that the world was without chaos in the previous years. There has been chaos in human history, but arguably today what we are seeing is something unique. Look back to the generation of your grandfather, they may not have had all the gadgets that we have, they may not have had even so much wealth at their disposal, and not have travelled in so many different parts of the world. They may have been simple people perhaps living a small town perhaps. But were they happier? Probably yes. Simple but happy.

Today our criteria for defining happiness are out of touch with reality. We define development in terms of economic criteria only .Everywhere I go, people are only talking economics. How to develop economically. But hardly anywhere is there is a need for spiritual development as a criterion for success. And its spiritual development that can make material success actually meaningful. We talk of GDP's and GNP's, but there is only one country in the world, a tiny country, that has a *gross happiness index* and that is Bhutan. And I was very impressed with it for the first time. Now whether they have a spiritual paradigm I don't know, but the very fact that they could think like this was itself so impressive .Otherwise every country is talking about material development. The true quality of happiness is something people are not thinking about. What is the most valuable thing that we need? But because we haven't understood what is valuable and what is not, we are striving and going on the wrong path.

I'll tell u a little story; it's about a little Indian village. There was a young man who went abroad and made it very big and he returned to India. Unfortunately he became culturally uprooted since he spent so much time out of India. And he had to cross a river in order to reach his village, so he negotiated the fees with the boatman to take him across. It was a cloudy evening, but the man said he would pay a high fee to go across. He sat in the boat and then took out his iPad and started working. And he asked the boatman 'so do have an iPad or an iPhone ? 'The

boatman said he did not know what that was. And so the man said "oh u have wasted 25% of your life ". So as they were going, it started to rain, and the man went on the internet to check the weather forecast. And he asked the boatman, "So do you know anything about meteorology, how to predict weather and stuff or the internet? ". The boatman said he did not know what he was talking about. And the man said "oh 50% of your life is wasted ". And then as they travelled, he asked the boatman, "So do u know how to speak English? ". The boatman said no and the man said "Oh 75% of your life is wasted! ". In the meantime, the rain became stronger and the wind and waves more aggressive. The boat was in a very precarious condition and the man started becoming very afraid and he was clinging onto the boat. And he told the boatman to do something to save them. The boatman said yes I am struggling. This went on for a while, and the storm continued to get more and more aggravated, and there was a point when there seemed no hope that the boat will be saved. At that time , the boatman asked the man "do you know how to swim?" and the young man replied no I don't know how to swim .So the boatman replied "then 100% of your life is wasted."

The reason I am telling you this story, is to indicate that not everything that we think is valuable, cherishable, relishable. The really valuable things in life, we don't strive to attain them because we don't think it's valuable. We think in materialistic terms. And because we are devoid of this spiritual inclination, so we always strive for things that will not bring us happiness eventually. So material success is something that will come, dependent on various factors. It's not intelligence and hard work only that bring success. There are many people in this world who are very intelligent, very capable, very dynamic, but who couldn't be successful. And there are many people who may not be as intelligent as some others and not so capable, but they are very successful, materially speaking. But there are factors beyond our control that make or break our material success. But nevertheless, whether one is materially successful or not, one has to live in this world, one has to perform his duties, maintains ones family. One has to be a respectable, dignified person in this world.

So in the course of striving for a livelihood and purpose in our life, if one is spiritually attempting to make progress, one will be able to cope with the struggles of life much better. And having attained success, one will be able to handle that success very effectively and then

tap that success to do good for oneself and to the world. Material success that is embellished with spiritual maturity and understanding can be a tremendous tool for the welfare of the world.

We do not decry material success or wealth, wealth is neither good nor bad. Just as a knife isn't good or bad. In the hands of a murderer a knife can cause death, in the hands of a surgeon, it can save a life. Similarly wealth used for wrong purposes can cause havoc; wealth used for good purposes can do much good to the world. A lot of the damage being done to the world by people who are educated, intelligent, capable and successful. And the damage has come about because of their success. And that success has come about without spiritual development correspondingly. No spiritual development has taken place, so that development has caused an avenue to cause harm to the world. Whatever crisis we see today environment crisis or any other is driven by our lower needs our lower nature. Even the present day economic model of capitalism seems to be based on greed, based upon lust, seems to be based upon unbridled desire. More, more and more. There is no limit. There is a saying *that there is enough in this world, for everyone's need but there isn't enough in this world even for one man's greed.*

I remember when I was a schoolboy I read this poem, something very beautiful. The poet said that all the trees in this world were like pens and all the oceans were ink, and the sky were like reams of paper, and if we started writing down our desires using these 'pens' and 'ink', the trees would all cease to exist, the oceans would dry out and there would be no space left to write on the sky. But still we would have more desires. And as a child this influenced me very deeply and I understood that's actually the nature of greed. It is like an insatiable fire that blazes within the heart and destroys reason, destroys logic, destroys compassion. What one will not do when one's heart is possessed by greed, or lust or anger or jealousy? Damage to the world is caused because we have unleashed all these negative emotions through a capitalistic country. So the modern style of capitalistic economy which is greed based, it is doomed for failure. There is increasing disillusionment and frustration. We speak about so many issues. For eg In Europe, bankers are actually hesitant to disclose in a social gathering that they are bankers. Because people look at bankers in such a way since they are responsible for the so many crisis today in the world. They get huge bonuses and tax payers have to pay to bail out

banks. There is so much angst, that they (bankers) actually have to camouflage and say something else about what they are doing.

So the fact of the matter is, that a greed based capitalist economy is not going to do good to the world even though it results in marvelous almost miraculous development. Then someone may say well the antidote to that is communism. In that regard I remember a quote "*Communism is the opposite of capitalism or it is the reverse of capitalism. In capitalism man exploits man, and in communism it's the reverse*".

In other words devoid of spirituality , whatever political or economical philosophy we devise , socialism , Marxism , any ism , will bring us to the point of happiness or success. It's only by delving into our inner depths and bringing out the innate spirituality to the surface can we actually succeed.

In the current situation also, many thinkers across the world, are talking about sustainable capitalism. They are talking about capitalism that will not destroy itself that will not self destruct. Because when there is unbridled greed it will self destruct. So now people are talking about sustainable economics, sustainable capitalism. So these are all well intentioned ideas no doubt, but how does one make it sustainable. What is that one software that will make it sustainable?

You see it's easy to change political, economic and social philosophies but can you change the heart of people? What we are talking about is, changing the hearts and changing the nature of people. Human nature doesn't change if one becomes a communist after becoming a capitalist or vice versa or by accepting any other such philosophy. Unless the human heart and our human nature is changed, unless we transcend the lower natures and come to a higher platform of consciousness, we will not be able to solve our problems. If you want to solve a problem, then you have to go to a higher level of consciousness than the consciousness that gave rise to the problem in the first place. So if you want to solve material problems, you have to come to the spiritual platform which is higher than the material platform.

So therefore my humble submission today is, that material success and spirituality are not mutually compatible necessarily, it could be but yet not. In fact they would be wonderful companions in our effort to do good to ourselves and the world. A spiritually minded person who has wealth, who has power, is influential, who has capability, and intelligence and so on can be a wonderful agent of positive change in this world. The greatest changes in society and transformations that have happened only by individuals and small groups of people, whether changes for the negative or changes for the positive. Only small groups of committed people have made these changes. So if we have only small groups of spiritually minded professionals and entrepreneurs and those who are successful in this world. And if they accept in a very serious way, the spiritual way of life, then the world can be truly, genuinely, deeply transformed. We can create a world where happiness will not just be something utopian, happiness will no longer be something elusive. It will be something tangible, something accessible, and something that everyone one of us can & should strive for.

The subject of what one has to do to become spiritual is another topic. But today my focus was the need to establish the need for spirituality. And as one moves ahead and become serious to know this then comes the next step. And then when tries to inquire what is it that one has to do to become spiritual .It is not a matter of being a Hindu or a Muslim, or Christian or anything of this sort. One can be genuinely spiritual regardless of one's spiritual affiliations or ones other political and social recreations. WE are talking of something that is completely non sectarian, something beyond, something transcendental

Success unfortunately today is defined in terms of our increasing needs and wants . Therefore we have the shopping malls, and mind boggling display of products and gadgets which mesmerize the minds of people. And we just consume, consume, consume thinking it will make us happy .So this consumerist economy, which actually feeds the greed within us, that increases it, more and more. But success it to be measured not by how much we consume or by how much we need or want but rather by what degree we have been able to transcend these wants and needs. To what degree we can live in simplicity even in the midst of plenty. That is the challenge that faces us today. And if at least the fundamental idea that we must move to a spiritual way of life and avoid very ostentatious lifestyles of enjoyment and display of wealth

and power and so on and we want to simplify our life and think about higher things , think about spiritual value san d spiritual accomplishments then I think the successful people in this world would do a phenomenal service to the world.