

How to Deal with Adversity

By Satyanarayana Dasa

Nobody, except masochists, likes to suffer, but no one can avoid adversity. Bhagavan Krishna calls the material world an abode of misery, *duhkhalayam* (Gita 8.15), but He qualifies it as *asasvatam*, or temporary, meaning that misery does not endure. There are cycles of adverse and favourable situations in everyone's life. Everyone experiences pain and pleasure, loss and gain, defeat and victory, failure and success, poverty and wealth, criticism and praise. Life goes through cycles, just like the seasons. Every situation, whether desirable or unfavourable, will fade away in due course of time. How you react to adversity is what's important.

How a Great Person Reacts to Adversity

The difference between a common person and a great one is how each deals with adversity. Great people remain sober and steady under all conditions. They are like the Sun which has the same brightness, while rising and setting and during the progressive stages in between. A great person remains steadfast even when there is turmoil around him. A great person is not one who never suffers in his life, but who faces even more adversity than an ordinary being. He always remains balanced, although not because of callousness or indifference.

A great person does not react to a situation, but takes suitable action according to the situation, all the while maintaining equipoise. For many people, if things go their way, they are elated, but if things do not go their way, they feel frustrated or distressed. Instead of being observers, they become slaves to the situation around them. "Act and do not react" is the mantra for being great.

The Choice Is Ours

Every situation has a plus side and a negative side. We can choose to look at either one. In an adverse situation, we can test our own patience, forbearance and ability to make decisions as well as to learn something new. To develop a muscle, one has to exercise and feel pain in the muscle. In the same way, one needs to go through the pain of adversity in order to develop intellectual muscle. We come to know who our real friends and well wishers are only when we pass through tough times.

If we see adversity as an opportunity for learning and advancement, we will not be mortified or anxious when faced with it. Rather, we may even feel blessed. In fact, many times blessings come in the guise of adversities. If we have such an attitude, we will become stronger by every unfavourable situation. We will begin enjoying adversity in a sort of spiritual masochism.

Purification in the Fire of Adversities

A person who has not faced any problems in life may not develop much psychologically. Problems give us an opportunity to purify our hearts, just as gold is purified by being melted and having the impurities blown away. In the same way, one has to be heated in the fire of adversity to be purified. Gold is shaped into a beautiful ornament by heating and being beaten with a hammer. Our character develops in the same way by the hammer of troubles. The greatness of great people is frequently known through the many tribulations they faced. If Jesus had lived the comfortable life of a preacher or teacher, nobody would remember him today. He is remembered for his sacrifice and steadiness of mind, even while being crucified.

A person of balanced mind is like an ocean, and adversities are like the rivers. Many rivers enter an ocean, but the ocean does not overflow. We should stay equanimous in the face of adversities. This is the key to success in life.

Kunti, the mother of Arjuna, prayed for perennial adversities. Usually we pray to bring an end to a difficult or distressful situation, but she did just the opposite. She wasn't crazy or a masochist, but very intelligent. She said that when calamities came into her life, she had a vision of God. And what could be better than that? I would not advise such a prayer for most people. Leave that for great people like Kunti. Calamities come without prayers, but let us learn to face them with an unnerving mind.

A Blessing in Disguise

The mind naturally becomes stressed in an adverse situation. It needs to be trained to remain calm. Being anxious and stressed does not mitigate the situation, but makes us weak, mentally as well as physically. Worrying over a problem is natural, but worrying is useless and unhealthy. If we are unable to find a solution to a miserable situation, we should tolerate it patiently. It will pass. Nothing is permanent. We suffer more by not accepting an inevitable situation or one that is beyond our control. Suffering happens in the mind, and that can be avoided through proper vision.

We can remain immune to suffering even in the most adverse situation by witnessing it, but not identifying with it. We should not run away from adversities by drowning ourselves in sense pleasures or using drugs to block out what is happening. When our pleasures are over or we come out of our state of intoxication, the problem will still be there, staring us in the face. The only difference will be that then we will be weaker than before. We would have missed an opportunity to learn, advance and become stronger.

Henry J. Kaiser, a very successful American industrialist (1882-1967), faced many challenges, but still wisely said, "Problems are only opportunities in work clothes." Let us face every situation as boldly and take every adversity as a blessing in disguise.