

The Spiritual Disaster of Material Attachment

An Echo from Ancient Greece

by Suhotra Swami

"Look upon this Oedipus, he who knew the famous riddle and was the most successful of men. Who among the citizens did not look upon him with envy. Into what a great wave of disasters he has crashed. So that, looking at that final day, count no mortal happy until he has passed the limit of his life suffering no pain."

--*Oedipus the King* by Sophocles

The nature of man and his struggle with ignorance, and the disastrous truth that ignorance obscures, is the theme of the tale of King Oedipus related by the classical Greek playwright Sophocles. Even now, almost two and a half millenia after it was written, the dramatic insight of *Oedipus Tyrannus* (Oedipus the King) cannot fail to fascinate the reader. Sigmund Freud wrote, "In the very text of Sophocles' tragedy there is an unmistakable reference to the fact that the Oedipus legend had its source in dream-material of immemorial antiquity . . ." The reason *Oedipus Tyrannus* remains so gripping, Freud believed, is that Sophocles translated it from the inchoate but enduring language of the *psyche*, the "voice within us which is prepared to acknowledge the compelling power" of this tragedy.

Oedipus was found by a shepherd on the slopes of Mount Citharon as an infant, with his ankles bound together (thus he was named Oedipus, which means "swollen-foot"). King Polybus and Queen Merope of Corinth adopted the foundling, raising him as a noble prince. As Polybus told him nothing of his real origins, he believed himself to be the king's son and heir. One day Oedipus heard a rumor that he was not the real son of the Corinthian ruler. The young man was so stubbornly devoted to the truth that even after his father's assurances that he was indeed his son, Oedipus went to the Oracle at Delphi to settle his doubts. However, instead of shedding light on his past, the oracle predicted a terrible future for Oedipus: he would kill his father and take his mother as his wife. To avert the possibility of his committing such crimes, Oedipus did not return to Corinth. During his travels he met a party of men at a crossroads. One of them, a

dignitary in a carriage, hit him as he passed by. A fight resulted. Oedipus, taking the party to be a band of robbers, slew the man in the carriage and all of his followers but one. He continued wandering until he came to Thebes (the modern Thebai, not far from Athens). Thebes was beset by the Sphinx, a monster with the head and breast of a woman, the body of a lion and the wings of a bird. Crouched on a rock outside the city, she demanded that travellers approaching the city answer her riddle, "What has four feet in the morning, two at noon and three at night?" All those who could not answer she killed. When Oedipus replied, "The answer is man, who crawls on four limbs as a baby, walks upright on two as an adult, and walks with the aid of a stick in old age," the Sphinx killed herself. The grateful Thebans made Prince Oedipus their king, since the ruler of the city, Laius, had been murdered during a recent journey. Oedipus took Jocasta, the wife of the dead king, as his own wife. Jocasta bore him two sons and a daughter, Antigone.

Thereafter a plague struck Thebes, blighting all the edible plants and sickening the cows and the women. To uncover the cause of the plague, Oedipus sent his brother-in-law Creon to Delphi to consult the oracle. Creon returned with the disturbing news that the plague struck Thebes because the city is giving shelter to the murderer of the previous king, Laius. Oedipus immediately launched an investigation, threatening anyone who had aided the killer or might be concealing the truth with severe punishment. He cursed whomever the murderer might be to suffer a miserable life. At first he suspected that Creon killed King Laius, because Creon would have inherited the Theban throne had not Oedipus arrived to defeat the Sphinx. But as he compiled the testimony of various witnesses, Oedipus soon learned that King Laius was killed at a crossroads by someone unknown. Then he learned that Queen Jocasta had given a son to Laius years before. But because of a prophecy that this child would kill his own father, the king abandoned the baby on the slopes of Mount Citharon.

A messenger arrived from Corinth to inform Oedipus that King Polybus had died. The messenger also revealed that Oedipus was not the real son of Polybus, but was found on the slopes of Mount Citharon. Hearing this, Jocasta begged Oedipus to stop his investigation, and when he refused she took her own life, though the reason for her suicide was not yet clear to Oedipus. Finally, the single survivor of Laius' travel party testified that it was Oedipus himself who had killed Laius, and that the son of Laius abandoned on Mount Citharon had been adopted by King Polybus. The disastrous truth was at last revealed: Oedipus was the murderer of his father and had

committed incest with his mother. Utterly disgusted with himself, Oedipus put out his own eyes and went into exile.

A spiritual analysis of the Oedipus tragedy

Sophocles presented *Oedipus Tyrannus* as a drama of human responsibility and divine omnipotence. Sigmund Freud called this "an uncomprehending secondary elaboration of the material." He analyzed the story in his own materialistic way, known to every educated person as Freud's theory of the Oedipus Complex. We propose that a Krsna conscious analysis of Sophocles' play is more in keeping with Sophocles' intent than Freud's. The reader interested in evidence of the many "parallels between Greek and Indian eschatology" that tend to support our way of analysis is invited to consult *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient* by Oxford scholar M.L. West.

Our analysis comprises six points.

1) Oedipus represents every soul covered by ignorance. Although he was apparently wise and good, due to an illusion unbeknownst to him he was actually foolish and wretched.

2) Oedipus was cast away by his father because he was fated to be his father's rival. Similarly, the Supreme Father places the souls who intend to usurp His position within the material nature.

3) In ignorance, Oedipus killed his own father and took his mother as his wife. Similarly, the souls in Maya kill God consciousness with atheistic, materialistic ideologies. Having disposed of God, they then claim His *sakti* (feminine material energy) as their own to enjoy as they like. Since the souls receive their bodies from the material energy, she is actually their mother.

4) Jocasta begged Oedipus to stop his investigation. Similarly, whenever an ignorant soul comes in contact with the truth, Maya attempts to drag him back into ignorance by appealing, "where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise." Jocasta's suicide represents the end that spiritual knowledge spells for illusory material happiness.

5) The tragedy of Oedipus gets its psychological power from a hidden truth about every one of us: that in a profound philosophical sense, we are guilty of patricide and incest with our mother.

6) Oedipus' blinding himself represents the penance of spiritual awakening. In order to see spiritually, the material eyes (or the science of ignorance that hides rather than reveals the science of truth) must be renounced.

The psychopathology of lust

"There must be a voice within us which is prepared to acknowledge the compelling power of fate in the *Oedipus*," wrote Freud. "His fate moves us only because it might have been our own, because the oracle laid upon us before our birth the very curse which rested upon him." The curse laid upon us before our birth is lust, which, as Krsna explains in *Bhagavad-gita 3.39, is the eternal enemy of the soul. Lust covers our innate spiritual knowledge and impells us to perform the depraved acts even without our realizing it. According to Vedic injunction, *matrvat para-daresu*: every woman other than a man's lawful wife is his mother, and every man other than a woman's lawful husband is her son. Most people in the world today, of course, do not view one another in this way, which is a Vedic method of purifying human relationships of illicit attractions. Fated by the sinful *karma* of previous lifetimes, born in a society ignorant of Vedic principles, countless modern Oedipuses are driven by lust into the sexual embrace of their mothers every day.

Is there any wonder, then, that all is not right today in the minds of mankind? The *Bhagavad-gita* defines an unbalanced mind as one that swings between the dualities of *sukha* (material pleasure) and *dukha* (material distress). As much as the mind lusts after *sukha*, it must proportionately suffer *dukha*. As we see practically: the same world media that daily seduces us with the genital character role model, likewise daily shocks us with real-life sex-horror stories--a debauched, mentally unstable mother drowns her two children; a psychopathic man murders a series of sex partners and keeps their dead bodies in his closet for necrophilia; and so on. These modern true-life tragedies, like the ancient Oedipus tale, dramatize externally the private hell of our own uncontrolled minds. A voice within us acknowledges the compelling power of the fate of all such victims of lust, for we share their fate to one degree or another.

Krsna says to Uddhava, *durjayanam aham manah*: "Of things that are difficult to conquer, I am the mind." (*Bhag*. 11.16.11) And to Arjuna He says, "For one who has failed to conquer the mind, that mind is his greatest enemy." (*B.g*. 6.6) We are fated by lust to make an enemy of our real father. He, Manomaya, the Lord of the

Mind, therefore defeats us *by our own ignorance*. What is that ignorance? It is, again, the subjective-idealist mistake of thinking *I am the mind*. To think "I am the mind" is to think "I am Krsna, the controller of matter." Yet by thinking "I am the mind" we come under the control of matter. And thus we suffer.

Shifting the burden

The science of ignorance, psychology, has no solution for suffering, because it is based upon the same misidentification with the mind that causes the suffering in the first place. The mind is many-branched, constantly manufacturing newer and newer speculations. Following the ways of the mind, psychology is likewise many-branched. The school Freud founded, psychoanalysis, is only one of at least seven schools of psychology, and even the Freudian school itself is now many-branched. Among the schools and their subdivisions there is no overarching theory about human suffering, its causes, or its treatment. One school says suffering is caused by biochemistry. Another school says it is caused by social factors. Still another school says all suffering can be traced to childhood. But whatever the theory may be, the prescription is *never* the renunciation of the idea that "I am the mind," and *never* the renunciation of lust. Psychology is the science of ignorance precisely *because it attempts to shift the burden of attachment from one material object to another*. A typical example from Freudian psychology would be of a woman who has difficulties in her marriage because of an unconscious attachment to her father; her analyst would try to help her shift her attachment from her father to her husband. But this is like shifting the weight of a heavy load from one shoulder to another. Initially there may be relief. But eventually the load will again become too troublesome to bear. Still, renunciation seems too extreme for most people. King Oedipus' dreadful renunciation of his ignorant, wretched mode of existence may appear to us to be a cure more drastic than the disease. But renunciation is likely to be a drastic, forced affair so long as one remains part of an ignorant society. Wherever ignorance predominates is called hell (cf *Bhag.* 11.19.43). In the hellish association of people who are addicted to bad habits, about the most a sober-minded person can do to renounce bad habits is to forcibly repress desire. Such repression itself is hellish and ultimately hopeless.

Join the society of love

Krsna tells Uddhava, *sat-sangah sarva-sangapaho*, "by associating with My pure devotees one can destroy one's attachment

for all objects of material sense gratification." (*Bhag.*11.12.2) The society of devotees cultivates the mode of goodness by the method Krsna calls *mat-arthesv anga-cesta*, "the offering of ordinary bodily activities to Me." (*Bhag.*11.19.22) This is *varnasrama-dharma*, by which the modes of passion and ignorance are overthrown, pacifying the physical and mental instincts.

But more than this, Krsna's devotees constantly hear and chant about Him, worship Him, praise Him, serve Him, bow down before Him, worship His devotees, see Him in all living beings, engage their words in describing Him, offer their minds to Him, renounce all material desires, wealth, sense pleasure and material happiness for Him, and perform all kinds of pious works for Him. By all these activities, the fully surrendered devotees *automatically develop love for Krsna*.

How can it be so easy to develop love for Krsna? The answer is very simple: the true object of every soul's pure attraction is Krsna, who loves all His parts and parcels so strongly that He stays in their hearts even if they forget Him. Now, although Krsna loves both the liberated and conditioned souls equally and for all time, it is up to us who are conditioned to learn how to favorably reciprocate with His love. That is why we must associate with His pure devotees. Krsna tells Uddhava that repeatedly, age after age, demons, birds, beasts, celestial demigods and fallen, low-grade human beings achieve His eternal abode simply by associating with His devotees and learning from them how to love the Lord in return for His love. (*Bhag.* 11.12.3,4) Even the Personified Vedas, who are liberated authorities of Vedanta philosophy, aspire to love Krsna in the manner of the *gopis*, His spiritual consorts headed by Srimati Radharani, who are embraced by His mighty serpentine arms. Krsna explains why as follows. "My dear Uddhava, just as great sages in *yoga* trance merge into self-realization, like rivers merging into the ocean, and are thus not aware of material names and forms, similarly, the *gopis* of Vrndavana were so completely attached to Me within their minds that they could not think of their own bodies, or of this world, or of their future lives. Their entire consciousness was simply bound up in Me. All those hundreds of thousands of *gopis*, understanding Me to be their most charming lover and ardently desiring Me in this way, were unaware of My actual position. Yet by intimately associating with Me, the *gopis* attained Me, the Supreme Absolute Truth." (*Bhag.* 11.12.8,9) The trance of *yoga* is called *samadhi*, a word formed from *sama* (sameness) and *dhi* (intelligence). Great sages like the Personified Vedas find the Lord in the Heart through intelligence purified by

disciplined meditation and exhaustive study of the Vedas. Like a river flowing into the sea, the consciousness of the *yogi* follows the course of pure intellect to attain the same transcendental nature as that of the Lord, beyond all material conceptions. But Krsna says that the *gopis* surpassed all material conceptions simply by their pure love, even though they did not know, as do the Vedas, Krsna's position as the Supreme Absolute Truth. The Vedas consider the *gopis* to be the superior transcendentalists because even without scholarship, austerity and meditation, they are yet most dear to the Lord. In *Srimad-Bhagavatam* 11.14.20, Lord Krsna explains why. "My dear Uddhava, the unalloyed devotional service rendered to Me by My devotees brings Me under their control. I cannot be thus controlled by those engaged in mystic yoga, Sankhya philosophy, pious work, Vedic study, austerity or renunciation." Great sages who after many lifetimes of effort come to the end of all knowledge (Vedanta), understanding that the Absolute Truth is the supreme lovable object, then put knowledge aside to serve the lotus feet of the Lord, following the example of the best of the transcendentalists, who have pure love for Krsna. In this way, Krsna becomes theirs.

The original sex psychology, and its perversion

The original and pure sex psychology is called *adi-rasa*, the emotional life of conjugal love exchanged between Krsna and the *gopis* in the spiritual world. Although the cultivation of the intellect through Vedanta leads one to this conclusion, intellectualism must be surpassed in order to actually enter into *adi-rasa*. It is the supreme state of spiritual joy.

Atheistic intellectuals like Freud, on the other hand, lead people in the opposite direction, to the conclusion that genital-love is the original psychology. Genital-love is the *adi-rasa* pervertedly projected upon the cinema-screen of the false ego. The conditioned souls sit in the darkness of ignorance, like persons in a darkened cinema house, and view the illusions of lust, the supreme state of material joy. Just as Vedantists abandon the cultivation of pure intellect to enter into the *adi-rasa*, so do the materialists abandon the intellectualism of atheistic thinkers to immerse themselves further and further in illicit sex.

For instance, in Freud's so-called classical theory of psychoanalysis, homosexuality is regarded as a mental disease. But the consequence of Freud's philosophy, which focuses the mind on genital-love as the all and everything of life, is that the mind of modern man has become

so increasingly overwhelmed by lust that the line dividing normal and abnormal sexual behavior keeps moving in the direction of the abnormal. And because lust, as Krsna says, is all-devouring and never satisfied (*B.g.* 3.37,39), there is no limit to extremes of sexual behavior that may be someday included as normal behavior. Now, at the end of the twentieth century in the Western world, homosexuality has become largely acceptable. If we are so gauche as to declare in a public forum that homosexuality is a mental disease, we can expect vehement objections to be raised. Pederasty is still forbidden. But there is a movement that argues for the its legalization. Pederasty was quite legal in ancient Greece and Rome, so from a historical standpoint, its becoming socially acceptable in our time is not inconceivable. Lust steadily erodes all moral restraints; because modern mundane intellectuals promote lust, society has become increasingly immoral. The atheistic thinkers equate immorality with freedom. But this freedom is a dangerous illusion.

When lust is unbound in the human form of life, the soul becomes bound to take births in lower forms, that just befit its lusty proclivities. Material nature provides bodies to suit every kind of sexual taste. Earthworms have both male and female sex organs and mate bisexually. Certain flowers produce an imitation form of a female insect, which attracts the male of that species to sexually enjoy the imitation female. The flowers are thus pollinated by the insects flying from flower to flower. This is simultaneously sex between two species, and sex with an artificial prop. There is no end to the variety of sex life in lower species. This is where atheistic theories of sex psychology inevitable lead. This is the greatest disaster for the soul. To avoid falling victim to perverted sexual psychology and thus suffering untold births in degraded bodies, we must renounce ignorance.

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