

Lecture given by H.H. Suhotra Swami
on Bhagavad-gita 2.29,
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Title: Last Days of Socrates

*āścarya-vat paśyati kaścīd enam
āścarya-vad vadati tathaiva cānyaḥ
āścarya-vac cainam anyaḥ śṛṇoti
śrutvāpy enam veda na caiva kcalcit*

TRANSLATION

Some look on the soul as amazing, some describe him as amazing, and some hear of him as amazing, while others, even after hearing about him, cannot understand him at all.

PURPORT

Since Gītopaniṣad is largely based on the principles of the Upaniṣads, it is not surprising to also find this passage in the Kaṭha Upaniṣad (1.2.7):

*śravaṇayāpi bahubhir yo na labhyaḥ
śṛṇvanto 'pi bahavo yaṁ na vidyuḥ
āścaryo vaktā kuśalo 'sya labdhā
āścaryo 'sya jñātā kuśalānuśiṣṭaḥ*

The fact that the atomic soul is within the body of a gigantic animal, in the body of a gigantic banyan tree, and also in the microbic germs, millions and billions of which occupy only an inch of space, is certainly very amazing. Men with a poor fund of knowledge and men who are not austere cannot understand the wonders of the individual atomic spark of spirit, even though it is explained by the greatest authority of knowledge, who imparted lessons even to Brahmā, the first living being in the universe. Owing to a gross material conception of things, most men in this age cannot imagine how such a small particle can become both so great and so small. So men look at the soul proper as wonderful either by constitution or by description. Illusioned by the material energy, people are so engrossed in subject matters for sense gratification that they have very little time to understand the question of self-understanding, even though it is a fact that without this self-understanding all activities result in ultimate defeat in the struggle for existence. Perhaps they have no idea that one must think of the soul, and thus make a solution to the material miseries.

Some people who are inclined to hear about the soul may be attending lectures, in good association, but sometimes, owing to ignorance, they are misguided by acceptance of the Supersoul and the atomic soul as one without distinction of magnitude. It is very difficult to find a man who perfectly understands the position of the Supersoul, the atomic soul,

their respective functions and relationships and all other major and minor details. And it is still more difficult to find a man who has actually derived full benefit from knowledge of the soul, and who is able to describe the position of the soul in different aspects. But if, somehow or other, one is able to understand the subject matter of the soul, then one's life is successful.

The easiest process for understanding the subject matter of self, however, is to accept the statements of the Bhagavad-gītā spoken by the greatest authority, Lord Kṛṣṇa, without being deviated by other theories. But it also requires a great deal of penance and sacrifice, either in this life or in the previous ones, before one is able to accept Kṛṣṇa as the Supreme Personality of Godhead. Kṛṣṇa can, however, be known as such by the causeless mercy of the pure devotee and by no other way.

LECTURE BY HH SUHOTRA SWAMI:

So this verse and purport reminds me of Srila Prabhupada's appreciation for the Greek philosopher Socrates. Prabhupada said in the whole history of the western civilization there was only one philosopher. Socrates. Because he was a mukta purusha, he was a liberated soul. So Socrates was much appreciated by Srila Prabhupada, because he was preaching atma jnana, he was preaching this very knowledge of the soul, which is presented here in the second chapter of the Bhagavad-gita, but he was preaching to an audience in the ancient Greece and Athens, that was very unappreciative of this knowledge. Socrates, he made nice comparison, he said he was being trailed, he was put on trial because of his preaching. Because the Greeks then and now are very interested in sense gratification. I know because I go there, to Athens and I have seen myself. So they could not appreciate. Socrates was a very clever orator. At his trial he was seeming to praise the Greeks. He was saying: "The city Athens, it is like a fine horse, but a dead horse. And that's for me. I'm like a fly biting that horse." But then he went on to point out that this was not actually very favorable comparison. To compare human being to horse, that is also done in the Bhagavatam, sa eva go kharah. Foolish people who think that this body made of mucus, bile and air is the self, they are said to be sa eva go kharah, they are like cow or ass or horse, you may say. And so the great soul like Socrates, who comes among such people and preaches the science of the real self is not much appreciated by those who remain attached to this body and the so called pleasures. So Socrates was put on trial although he made a very brilliant speech, not defensive for himself, but defensive for his teachings. He did not actually care for what they planned to do with his body, because he knew I am not the body.

So in spite of his brilliant explanations, he was sentenced to death and he was even asked at his trial. "So Socrates, you'll have to die by drinking hemlock." That was the means of execution in those days, hemlock is a poison. So one would be placed in prison and on an appointed day the cup of hemlock would be brought to him and he would have to drink it. So he was asked: "When you drink the hemlock and you die, how do you want to be buried? In what way shall we dispose of you?" And Socrates said: "You can dispose of me if you can catch me." Prabhupada always appreciated that very much. He went to say that if you mean me, that means the soul. So you can dispose of me, bury me or burn me or whatever you want to do, if you can catch me. And as far as the body is concerned, who cares anyway? This was his attitude. So Socrates' most famous disciple was Plato. So Plato

wrote down all the teachings of Socrates, that's how we know them today. So one of his very famous works is called "The Last Days of Socrates" which describes his trial and it describes how Socrates met his end, the end of this body anyway, by drinking the hemlock. So at that last day Socrates was preaching about the soul. All his disciples, he, Socrates was married, so he had a wife, she was there too and she was crying. Some of the disciples were crying and some were trying to stop from crying and Socrates was saying: "Why are you crying? And he was explaining them very nicely about the soul and about how he was actually welcoming death as release. Socrates was not only situated in atma jnana, the knowledge of the soul, but he knew something about God too. At least we can say he was Supersoul realized because he used to say, that what I speak comes from within, from the Lord within me. He said throughout my whole life I have been guided from within, so that when I was faced with an opportunity to do right or wrong, if I would even think of doing something wrong, this voice, this presence within my heart would say: "No, Socrates, you cannot do this." And I was, he said, the difference between myself and other men, is that I would always listen to that voice, I would always follow. So Socrates was telling them: "By the grace of God I will meet God after the end of this body. So why do you lament like this?"

So his explanations were very brilliant and convinced everyone there except two persons. One was named Simyas (?), who is a follower of system of philosophy called the pythagorean system. There is Pythagorean mathematics known today. So Pythagoras was a mystic who lived long before Socrates, he is from Egypt, he is said to live in Alexandria or some place, I don't know Egypt anyway. So he was very much into mathematics and harmonics and balance of equals and all the sorts of things. Like many people are today. So this Simyas was a pythagorean and then there was another person named Sebes. So both of them said to Socrates: "Although we find your words very persuasive and certainly we do agree with some of the points you are making, this point that you are making, this main point, that we should not lament for you because you will live on after death, that we can not accept."

This is an example here, I just want to bring us back to this verse for a moment – srutvapy enam veda na caiva kascit. The soul is such, the subject of the soul is so amazing to people caught up in the material consciousness, that even after they hear about the soul from one who is realized in the soul, these people who are absorbed in the gross body they fail to understand. These two persons, Simyas and Sebes, they could not understand even after hearing Socrates explain so nicely. Socrates asked both of them: "You please explain to me what your judgement are to what I have said. What is your philosophical standpoint?" So they both put forward some arguments.

And it's interesting that their arguments we can discuss in the light of some verses of the Bhagavad-gita. So for Simyas we can turn to chapter two text seventeen. Krishna says here: "That which pervades the entire body you should know to be indestructible. No one is able to destroy that imperishable soul." Now what is interesting is that Simyas, he accepted part of this statement, the first part. Just like both Simyas and Sebes they said to Socrates: "Some of what you say we accept, but not the conclusion." So Krishna here is saying that the soul pervades the entire body, but then the conclusion is you should know that to be indestructible. So Simyas accepted that there is a soul and that it pervades the entire body, but he could not accept that it's indestructible because he was a follower of Pythagoras. In

this Pythagorean idea of the soul the body is a composite of balances. There are so many different factors in the body and they all are balanced very, very finely. So the Pythagoreans take that very balance to be the soul and they make a comparison, like a musical instrument, violin for instance. What is a violin, it's an arrangement of wood and ivory and strings. And then, when the violin is properly tuned, then there's that mysterious quality, that you can say, incorporeal quality. It is not a physical quality. We see the Pythagoreans accept that the soul is not physical. So when the instrument is finely tuned that quality of being tuned, when you plug the string, then a certain note is sounded. That is invisible incorporeal and it is also splendid and for those who like music they will say: "It is divine, very beautiful." Yes, so they will agree with all these points, it is so nice, but when the instrument breaks, if the violin is broken, if the strings pop out of the frame then the tuning is finished forever. This was his argument that that which we call soul, yes it is there, it is invisible, it is incorporeal, it cannot be found in anything physical and yet in the same time it's existence depends upon the fine tuning of the body. And when the body is finished, the soul is finished. So that was Simyas's argument.

Then Sebes, he had an argument which pertains to the 22nd verse of 2nd chapter of Bhagavad-gita. This verse reads: "As a person puts on new garments giving up old ones the soul similarly accepts new material bodies giving up the old and useless ones." So Sebes agreed with that. He said, just like Krishna says in the Bhagavad-gita, that kaumaram yauvnam jara. We are accepting youthful bodies or a child body, then youth body then old body. So Sebes said: "Yes, so similarly, the soul is accepting a succession of bodies in this life," but then actually he was using this very same analogy, he said: "Just like a human being in his life, he is putting on clothes and the clothes are wearing out, or he is getting tired of them or whatever and then he is changing his clothes, he is putting on new clothes. And throughout his life he is changing his clothes. But at the end of his life he dies and then he doesn't put on any more clothes." Sebes said: "So just like that the soul is moving through a succession of bodies and the soul is indeed outliving because the soul is powerful, so the soul is outliving one body after another, but at some point in the life the soul itself dies and then you don't see the soul taking on any more bodies." Clever, huh?

Actually it was so clever that all the people in the room except for Socrates, they were amazed by these arguments and they said to Socrates: "Socrates, we were convinced by everything you were saying, but now that we heard these two, we've lost all of our faith." This shows what kind of people he was teaching. So then this work "Last days of Socrates" is very humorous actually, Socrates engages in some joking, some patting of heads, "Oh, you are a good boy to come up with such nice arguments" and then he proceeded to smash them completely in just a few words. The way he took care of the first argument about the tuning of the instrument with violin comparison between finely tuned instrument and the balances within the body is that he asked Simyas: "So clearly from your example than that which you call the soul is totally subordinate to the body, isn't it? Just like the tuning of an instrument depends on the instrument entirely. The way the physical set up of the instrument is done, that will depend on the tuning. There's no independence of this which you call soul from the body." And Simyas, he agreed. So then Socrates asked him: "Then how do you explain the soul's exertion against the dictates of the body?" For instance, not even to discuss about those who are on the spiritual path endeavoring to control their senses for spiritual advancement, even among the sense enjoyers, even among the karmis, when they are hungry due to whatever reasons, even it

may be he is just working at his job and his stomach is rumbling, but he controls it. He says: "No, I can't eat now I have to wait till the lunch hour. Otherwise I may lose my job. I'm not supposed to eat." And, in some other case, even among materialists he may be sleepy, but he forces himself to stay awake and someone may be lusty desiring sex, but he cannot do it because he is on the bus, all kinds of people standing there. So he has to wait till he gets home. And someone else for some reason the urge is there, the bodily response is there to defend oneself because he is just been slapped in the face but he controls himself – don't do anything because the person who slapped him is twice as big as him. So even among materialists they control the tendencies of the body. So if the soul, if the consciousness is completely subordinate to the body than how is that possible? For instance we do not see an instrument tuning itself. If we have a nicely tuned violin, there is no way, that the violin did that itself. Obviously some conscious entity picked up the violin and turned the keys and plugged the strings and got it to a right tune. It is actually through consciousness that we appreciate that an instrument is tuned or not tuned. So consciousness is actually opposing the nature of the body, even among material, materialists. In order for this material society to go on, the consciousness of even the karmis, you'll see if you examine what's going on for the most part the karmis are opposing their bodily urges. For the most part. They have to, otherwise how will life go on?

Just like yesterday we were riding from Italy, from Milano, and actually yeah, we came from the temple in Bergamo. We went first to Milano to give a class and than to come to Germany. So we left the temple very early before 6:30. And the autostrada was full of cars. It wasn't even light. I was driving with the devotee named Harideva, we were talking about this, how these karmis and you know probably half of these people on the road right now they were up until one, two in the morning last night drinking and dancing and who knows what they were doing. But because they have to go to work, they force themselves to get up, the body certainly doesn't want to. They force themselves to get up and they get in the car and they drive in the autostrada. So then what to speak of someone on the spiritual path who is controlling the urges of the body completely. Just like in Krishna consciousness – no meat eating under any circumstances, no illicit sex, no gambling, no intoxication ever. So this is done by the soul, by the consciousness.

Therefore Simyas, he had to agree that the soul has to be more than just the balances of the body. Because if it would be only something under the control of the body, then whatever the body desired, whatever urges appear within the body must be carried out immediately. Then for the next argument by Sebes, Socrates had a really interesting dialectic. So he asked Sebes: "Is fire hot?" Sebes said . "Yes." "Is snow cold?" "Yes, snow is cold" "And are fire and snow opposites in quality?" That means to say: "If you bring fire and snow together, if you build the fire, make a fire place out in a snowy field and light the fire, will the snow become hot? Will you see hot snow? Or will you see cold fire? He said: "No." "So they are absolutely opposite, they cannot coexist. The qualities of fire and the quality of snow can never coexist, is it not?" So Sebes said: "I do agree." Then Socrates asked Sebes: "So now what of this body, are the elements of this body - we are just talking about the constituent elements of this body - are they dead?" And he had to admit: "Yes, they're dead." And then he asked: "What brings life to the body?" And, because Sebes he did accept the soul, but under his own terms, that the soul can die, he said: "The soul brings life to the body." And then Socrates asked: "So, but still the body remains, the

elements of the body remain dead, is it not?" He said. "Yes." So the soul and the body are always distinct, they are always opposite, is it not?" "Yes." So then Socrates asked: "So the body and soul are opposite and you've said that the elements of the body are always dead. And you've said that the soul brings life to the body. So we must conclude that therefore the soul must also be always alive if they are opposite in every way." And Sebes had to say: "Yes. Logically you are right, Socrates." "So when the soul leaves the body, the body is a lump of dead matter, is it not? Which rots away and transforms into other material forms, earth and so on." "Yes." "So what of the soul? Wouldn't you agree that soul must continue to exist?" "Yes, Socrates, I have to agree."

So in this way Socrates actually simply by common sense he established that the soul being alive must always be alive. Just as the body being dead is always dead. This is common sense. But the problem is, the difficulty people have in understanding this is that because of lust they want the body to be the living self, because they want to enjoy. Who are they? They are the soul, they are the life force, they are the consciousness. But they want to enjoy matter which is dead. So, in order to do this they have to think of themselves as dead matter. But because they are alive, they can't think of themselves as dead, so they think that matter is alive. The body is actually the life itself. Now as soon as you entertain the dead material elements are actually alive, then, if you have also in your philosophy, your strange hodge-podge philosophy some idea of soul, as soon as you can think that the body is actually alive, then you can also entertain that the soul may die, isn't it? Because you've created one illogical equation by your lusty desire, so that automatically creates another, that the soul, the consciousness, may die. So this is due to lust.

And Prabhupada here also in the purport says that people who identify with the body, they cannot understand how the soul can be great and small. Prabhupada gave examples of how the atomic soul is within the body of gigantic animal, the body of gigantic banyan tree and also in the microbic germs, millions and billions of which occupy only an inch of space. So they find this amazing, this makes them disbelieve in the soul or makes the soul something that is just beyond their comprehension. And the fact is that the soul is beyond that comprehension that they are using, because in Bhagavad-gita 2.18, also in this chapter, Krishna uses a term for the soul – aprameya. Aprameya means immeasurable. A soul cannot be measured. Antavanta ime deha – the material body, deha, antavanta – that has an end. Now in this verse it means an end in time. These bodies will perish. But also anta can refer to end in space. So the bodies have their existence measurable in time but also measurable in space. So we see as Prabhupada mentions here – some very great bodies – elephant body, banyan tree, and very small bodies. So this is all prameya, this is all measurement. Measurement pertains as Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Maharaja said in a magazine interview in India, that maya, he gave this definition for the word maya, maya means measurable. So anything that can be measured with instruments, measured with any type of measure that means it's maya. It means it's material. And as far as the soul, it's aprameya, it's immeasurable. It's immeasurable in the sense that it's eternal, cannot be measured by units of time as this body can be, and is also immeasurable in terms of size.

Now, you may say, but the soul is described as atomic in size. Yes, smaller than the smallest, immeasurably small. This example of taking the tip of a hair and dividing it into a hundred parts and then dividing each one of those parts into a hundred, Prabhupada explains, that it's to illustrate that the soul is immeasurably small. Just like Krishna is

immeasurably great, but the point is both are immeasurable. Immeasurable means that it cannot be understood in terms of these immeasurable bodies. So the soul, the consciousness of the soul, can pervade as great or as small body you would like to give it. The body of Brahma, it is said that the whole universe is the width of I think something like seven hands of Lord Brahma. That information is given in Srimad Bhagavatam. So that's how big Brahma is. And then there are of course microbic germs. So jiva's consciousness can pervade any body you like within creation. Why? Because it is fundamentally immeasurable. But this jiva is called anu – immeasurably small, whereas the Lord, Krishna is called vibhu, He is immeasurably great. So from the pores of the body of Lord Mahavisnu are streaming countless universes. Anyone universe is beyond our power of comprehension.

Today scientists with all of their telescopes and instruments have failed to find the limit of this universe. So anyone of these universes is beyond our comprehension, what to speak of trying to understand how there are limitless number of universes. And they're all coming out of the pores of Mahavisnu. So this is inconceivable. This is another point here, Srila Prabhupada says that there are those who hear about the soul, they attain lectures in good association but sometimes due to ignorance they're misguided by acceptance of the Supersoul and the atomic soul as one without distinction of magnitude. Now this is another point here that such persons had become a little acquainted with the soul, but now they are amazed about the Supersoul. In other words understanding the soul is one thing, but then understanding where everything comes from, where this existence, this vast material existence, what the origin is, how it is maintained, that is amazing. So they become amazed and bewildered by that and in their bewilderment they may wrongly assume that somehow the soul, the individual soul, is responsible for the origin, the maintenance and the destruction of the entire cosmic manifestation. But the point is this amazement, this bewilderment, this in itself is the evidence of the distinction between the soul and the Supersoul.

Because as far as Krishna is concerned, Bhagavatam says, He is avismita, avismitam tam. He is avismitam tam pari purna kamam svena labhyena, so He is, first of all avismita means He is never amazed by anything because Krishna is perfectly situated in complete knowledge of everything, so there is nothing to surprise Krishna. Pari purna kamam, all of His desires, kama means desires, they fulfill themselves. Krishna has a name satya sankalpa, it means as soon as He has a desire it is fulfilled. In other words, wherever Krishna's desires are, that is what we call reality. There is not even a microscopic difference between Krishna's desires and that what is. So He is pari purna kamam. All of His desires they're fulfilled in themselves. Svenaiva labhena samam. So He is completely satisfied in His own transcendental glories, He is samam, He is always equipoised and prasanta means He is supremely peaceful, supremely satisfied. Why? Simply because He is Krishna. This is Krishna. This is why the jiva is not Krishna and that's a fact. As far as the jiva is concerned, there is only one way for the jiva to become santi, to become peaceful, to become satisfied and that is to become Krishna bhakta. Krishna bhakta niskama ataeva santa, because the Krishna bhakta, because he is a devotee of Krishna, he has taken shelter of Krishna, therefore he has surrendered all his desires to Krishna – this is the meaning of taking shelter of Krishna.

Prabhupada explained it once very nicely – he said just like when a son has surrendered to the father, the son may have desires, but he makes no endeavor to fulfill them outside of his dependence upon the father. So the son may go to the father, Prabhupada gave a nice example, he said the son may have a desire, small son may have a desire to see a certain film, Arnold Schwarzenegger film, which is playing in town. The son would like to see this film. He goes to the father and he says: “My dear father, there is a new Schwarzenegger film in town, may we go see it?” And the father says: “Yes, we can go.” Then the son is very happy to go and he goes under the protection of the father and he is actually taken care of completely by the father. The father brings in the son and says: “Would you like some popcorn?” “Oh, yes.” Then let us take popcorn. So the father provides everything. And they enjoy the film together. And actually for the son the film becomes much more enjoyable. He enjoys to see that father is enjoying this film. “It was my suggestion,” the son is thinking. “It was by my suggestion that we came into this movie house and I am so happy to see that father likes the film.” So the son is enjoying, but he is enjoying doubly, because the father is also enjoying. So his satisfaction is so much greater. So this is a good son.

Of course a bad son, than he may not ask the father at all or the father says no, than he breaks into the city bank, steals the money, goes to the theatre anyway, comes back and gets caught. That happened to me once when I was about seven years old, I wanted to see one cowboy film, my parents did not want me to see it. So somehow I got some money and I went to see it anyway and when I came back, because some friend of mine had also been at the showing of that film, so when I came back, I came back with the friend, we were talking about the film and I forgot, I mean I was so absorbed in talking about the film and I walked into my house with the friend, we were talking about the film and my mother was there and she was listening to us and she said: “So, you saw this film anyway, did you?” And then I was in trouble. So that’s what happens. When the living entity separates his desires from Krishna, then he is in trouble. So surrendering to Krishna means to surrender the desires and therefore one becomes *niskama*. Krishna bhakta *niskama*. Then he has no desires of his own. His own desires are...