

Detachment from Children

By Urmila Devi Dasi

Our Dead Son's Body, nine inches long, lay in my hand.

For some months afterward, my natural affection—that motherly impulse hard-wired into body and mind—cried for that child.

"What you grieve for is not the child," the midwife told me, "but how you had projected that child into your life."

I had become attached to a desire to have a child to love and enjoy. That attachment, based on the body instead of spiritual reality, was causing lamentation, in spite of my philosophical understanding. Many friends, devotees of Krsna, urged me not to artificially repress the grief, because such repression would lead to illness. I couldn't stop the grief anyway. It was a biological expression of motherhood.

Still, on the spiritual level I knew that I, the soul, had a spiritual relationship with the soul who had lived in that little smiling (yes, smiling) but gray body: We were related in the Lord's service, a relationship beyond the temporary body.

I gave him *prasadam*, and a chance to hear Krsna's holy name. I hope he used those opportunities to perfect his short life and return to his spiritual home. Even if he didn't, surely he has made progress on his spiritual journey, getting a better mother than I in the body he lives in now. He helped me spiritually, too, by giving me a chance to practice detachment and tolerance. His leaving made me depend more on Krsna for solace and shelter.

How odd that the most painful parental calamity, a child's death, can push us to discover what we so often forget throughout a child's life—that our loving relationship with our children has little meaning and no permanence outside of Krsna's service.

An Earlier Lesson in Detachment

I lost that child in 1992. He would have been our fourth. I remember thinking at the time, "Was it really thirteen years ago that I thought I had learned the lesson of detachment?" That earlier lesson had not been as severe as losing a child, but it had shaken the roots of my concepts about my relationship with my children.

The lesson came when our first son started school, in 1979. Before I even married, I was confident that if I had a child I would send that child for schooling in a traditional asrama, a *gurukula* school, where students live with their teacher. A couple of months after our first son, Murari (then Madhava), was born, my husband and I began looking for a good asrama. When he was almost five, we moved to a temple with an asrama *gurukula* and experienced teachers who treated the students with a balance of love and discipline. We spent several months getting our

son accustomed to his new life, first having him sit with other boys while they chanted on beads in the morning, then having him attend some academic classes.

Finally the day arrived to enroll him. Two days later my husband and I would move to another city. I started to pack Murari's suitcase. And I started to cry. I stopped to watch him play in the backyard.

"Why am I crying?" I thought. "For his whole life I planned to send him to school in this way."

I began to wonder at my relationship with this child. Would he ever live with us again? While Krsna had other plans and Murari spent only five years living in an asrama, at the time I felt he would live at school until ready to work as an adult.

"What relationship do I have with this child, anyway? Well, I'm his mother. My body gave birth to his body. But the body that gave birth no longer exists. My body now is different, changed. And his body is also different. His body is not that of a helpless infant. So where are those bodies that had the relationship of giving birth and being born? And, besides, neither of us is our body. We're souls, and by our karma and the Lord's desire we're temporarily traveling in these bodies. So if my relationship with my child is simply based on our bodies, it is completely illusory. I suppose he and I have no relationship."

But then I considered why I had married and why I had had this child. Our life with Murari was one of teaching him to love and serve Krsna.

"That is my relationship! My child and I help each other grow in love for Lord Krsna so we may come to the platform of spiritual existence. The bodily relationship is merely a temporary social formality in our real exchange of love."

Urmila Devi Dasi, initiated in 1973, has worked in ISKCON education since 1983. She and her family live in Hillsborough, North Carolina, where she runs a school for children aged 5-18. She is the main author/compiler of Vaikuntha Children, a gurukula classroom guidebook.