

Literature and Coping Skills
Professor Ajit K Mishra
Department of Humanistic Studies
Indian Institute of Technology (BHU) Varanasi
Lecture – 2
Existential Concerns

Hello, everybody, I am Ajit K Mishra, your course instructor for literature and coping skills. I am back with the second lecture. If you remember, we talked about a variety of things in the first lecture. And you might have taken note of those important things related to existential concerns- we are going to extend that idea of ours. And we are going to talk about the other aspects of existential concerns today. So, let us start.

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The slide features a light yellow background. On the left, the title 'Existential Concerns: A Recap' is displayed in a dark font. Below the title is a bulleted list of four items. On the right side of the slide, there is a video inset showing Professor Ajit K Mishra, a man with glasses wearing a blue shirt, sitting in front of a white brick wall. The NPTEL logo is visible in the top right corner of the video inset.

**Existential Concerns:
A Recap**

- Existential concerns are unavoidable
- The 'big five' existential concerns
- Ervin Yalom's 'four' existential concerns
- Existential anxiety

So, if you remember, we talked about these important aspects of existential concerns. And I told you that they are absolutely unavoidable, we cannot avoid the feeling or the experience of those concerns. As long as we exist, we are bound to experience; we are bound to feel those concerns. And we will have those concerns until this life comes to an end. But that is not important. What is important is how well we atune us, we adapt us to those challenges so that we do not enter the phase of existential anxiety.

We also talked about the big five existential concerns, starting with deaths, isolation, identity, freedom and meaning. At the same time, we also focused on Ervin Yalom's four basic existential concerns, this existential isolation, freedom and meaninglessness. And towards the end of our

discussion, we focused on existential anxiety, which I told you that it is very, very important for each one of us to take note of that we do not begin to experience existential anxiety.

Even if we begin to experience existential anxiety, we can think of taking care of them, so that we are promptly out of that particular situation. And we do not experience prolonged phases of existential anxiety. So, we are going to extend that discussion yet further. So, this is existential concerns, part two. So, let us focus on that.

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The slide features a light yellow background. On the left, the title 'Existential Concerns' is displayed in a bold, black font. Below the title is a bulleted list of four items: 'Safe and survival modes', 'Life and death instincts', 'Bhartrihari, "Fear of Death"', and 'Tagore, "Give Me Strength"'. On the right side of the slide, there is a video inset showing a man with glasses and a blue shirt speaking. In the top right corner of the slide, there is a circular logo with a stylized flower or star pattern and the text 'NPTEL' below it.

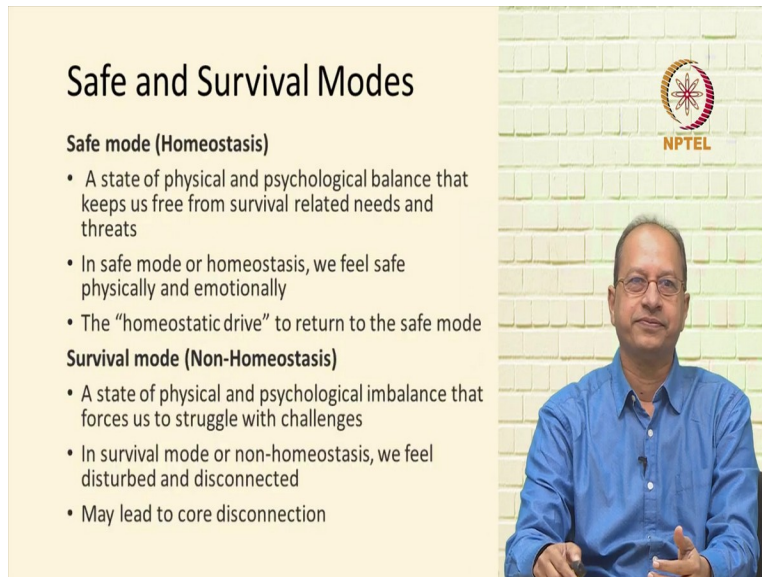
Today, I am going to talk about four very important things. Starting with this one that is safe and survival modes. We all find ourselves in either of these modes all the time. And there is always a constant battle between these two modes and how we as humans, strive to find ourselves in the safe mode, not in the survival mode. So, we will be talking about both modes in detail. The second thing that I am going to focus in in this lecture is life and death instincts, how these two drives or instincts, in fact, make it possible for us to live in a holistic manner in an authentic manner.

And then I am going to focus on one of India's greatest poets, thinkers, philosophers, Bhartrihari his Fear of Death, which is taken from Bhartrihari's Vairagya Shatakam. So, we are going to focus on the idea of fear and death, as complementary to each other. And we will see how Bhartrihari, in fact, approaches these two ideas. And then at the end, I will be focusing on

Tagore's Give me Strength, which in fact, gives us a very important message as to how we can take care of those existential concerns.

I must repeat that existential concerns are inevitable. They are unavoidable. So, there is no way we can escape the existential concerns. We will definitely have them. That is not the question. The question is how well are we adapt to those challenges? We respond to those questions, and how well we come out of those challenging situations. So, let us start with each of these things.

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The slide features a light yellow background with a white brick wall pattern. On the right side, there is a video inset of a man with glasses wearing a blue shirt, speaking. Above him is the NPTEL logo, which consists of a circular emblem with a stylized flower or star shape inside, and the text 'NPTEL' below it. The main text on the slide is as follows:

Safe and Survival Modes

Safe mode (Homeostasis)

- A state of physical and psychological balance that keeps us free from survival related needs and threats
- In safe mode or homeostasis, we feel safe physically and emotionally
- The "homeostatic drive" to return to the safe mode

Survival mode (Non-Homeostasis)

- A state of physical and psychological imbalance that forces us to struggle with challenges
- In survival mode or non-homeostasis, we feel disturbed and disconnected
- May lead to core disconnection

So, first we come to the idea of safe and survival modes, as I told you, we all are biological entities. So, we live on different types of planes with the leave on different modes. So, it is important that we first understand what these two modes are, and how these modes are very closely associated with our basic emotions. Basic emotions are those four emotions, are we talking about basic emotions in detail when we move to the next lecture.

But for now, I must tell you that basic emotions are happiness, sadness, anger, and the likes. So, these are the emotions that always keep us in a state of either balance or imbalance. So, it is very, very important that we understand these two modes, so that we also get to understand how we can, you know, return to the Safe Mode. And we do not find ourselves in the survival mode, most of the times, let me tell you what safe mode and survival modes are all about.

Safe mode, which is very popularly known as homeostasis is a state of physical and psychological balance that keeps us free from survival related needs and threats. That means as human beings as biological entities, we are evolutionarily designed to be in the safe mode, we can try to understand the importance of safe mode, in conjunction with what I have already talked about existential questions or concerns. So, when it comes to safe modes, we all would always like to be in the safe mode.

Because that is the mode in which we find our psychological and physical balance. And that mode ensures that we are free from those challenges, those distressing emotions and we are safe, contented and happy. So, that is the reason why in the safe mode or homeostasis, we always feel safe physically and emotionally. For example, in the company of our friends, our well wishers or family members, we always feel safe and protected, we do not experience any challenge.

So, the moment we find ourselves in the company of our friends, family members, we are in the safe mode. For example, whenever we reach home, we feel safe physically, because we feel we are protected, there is nothing that can disturb us anymore. Whenever we do not experience any external danger to our physical existence, we feel very, very safe and protected. So, at the same time, I must also tell you all that there is a homeostatic drive that we all experience as human beings.

We are designed or crafted in a way so that we continue to experience this homeostatic drive to return to the Safe Mode. Now that is a very interesting proposition because if we try to understand this particular idea, in connection with the existential concerns will understand that we are bound to experience existential anxiety, we are bound to have existential concerns. But this particular drive the homeostatic drive, allows us to return to the Safe Mode.

That means despite facing these existential challenges, we can always return to the safe mode because of this homeostatic drive, which is an evolutionary fact. So, Safe Mode is something that we all like to be in and we do things to return to the Safe Mode. But at the same time, I must also tell you all that safe mode is not guaranteed. No one can guarantee a safe mode for oneself. So, as humans, we have emotions that make us feel safe.

We also have emotions that make us feel distressed and challenged. For example, I told you that we have a few basic emotions, like happiness and sadness. So, happiness makes us feel safe,

contented, and sadness makes us feel very, very bad, disappointed. So, we cannot guarantee that we will always find ourselves in the safe mode. But there is something that makes it possible, it is the homeostatic drive.


But before the homeostatic drive is activated, we find ourselves in the survival mode. The moment there is a challenge, it can be an external challenge, it can be an internal challenge there is something that is disturbing you from within. Or there is something that is disturbing you from without or outside. So, any challenge to our protected state, safe mode will definitely push us to the survival mode, and will suddenly find ourselves in a survival mode. That means it is a state of physical and psychological imbalance.

That forces us to struggle with challenges. The moment something begins to disturb us and distress us, we will be faced with a challenge. So, that will lead to the imbalance between our psychological state and our physical state will feel disconnected. So, the safe mode, which makes us feel protected, will no longer be available to us, because we will suddenly find ourselves in a different kind of mode, the survival mode non homeostasis.

So, we begin to feel disturbed and disconnected. And if we do not activate the homeostatic drive, although I mean, we are naturally designed to return to the homeostatic state through the homeostatic drive, but unless we consciously activate the homesteading drive, it will not happen on its own. So, if that does not happen, it may mean that we continue to be in the survival mode for a prolonged period.


If that happens, that might result in core disconnection in dysfunctionality of our existence. So, it is always a good idea to activate once a homeostatic drive, so that we can promptly return to the Safe Mode after waging a battle with those distressing emotions. So, that we are again, happy, contented and protected. So, that is why it is very, very important for each one of us to understand these two modes, so that we begin to respond to our existential questions accordingly.

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Life and Death Instincts

- Freud's theory of drives helps us understand human behaviour and human response to existential questions.
- **Life instincts**
 - are aimed at the preservation of life
 - motivate people to nurture life
 - engage people in actions to sustain their lives
 - Inspire positive emotions, prosocial behaviour, and cooperation
- **Death Instincts**
 - are aimed at the destruction of life
 - demotivate people to nurture life
 - engage people in harmful actions including self-destruction
 - Create negative emotions, antisocial behaviour, and conflict



There is another pair, as I talked about, that is life and death drives or life and death instincts. Now, at the same time, our idea of approaching the safe mode or the survival mode depends largely on these two instincts on tribes. So, life and death instincts. So, life instincts are those instincts that make us feel like living, make us enjoy life, be in touch with life and fall in love is life. On the other hand, death instincts are those death drives or death wishes that force us to adopt a pessimistic approach towards life, treat life, always outmost disgust and disrespect at times and decide to put an end to life.

So, there is a constant battle between life and death instincts, and we need to understand that. So, let us take a look at each of these two instincts. So, but before that, let me tell you that these two instincts on the drives, were, in fact, first introduced to us, by Sigmund Freud, the father of psychology. And he first began by talking about life instincts. And then afterwards, in his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which was published in 1920, he added another drive to it that is death drive or death instincts.

So, Freud's theory, in fact, theory of drives, in fact, helps us understand human behavior. That is the first thing. So, how we behave in certain situations, and how we respond to our existential questions. So, these two are the most important things that we can try to understand in connection with this two instincts or drives. So, let us take a look at these two. First, it is the life

instincts, as I have already told you, that we are biologically or evolutionarily crafted in a way to return to the safe mode.

So, by (deact) by activating the homeostatic drive. So, the homeostatic drive has a lot to do with the life instincts. Because we want to feel safe, therefore, we have to go for life instincts, because these instincts are aimed at the preservation of life. So, they help us preserve life, protect life. And they also motivate us to nurture life. So, that we fall in love with life, we design our lives in a way so that we continue to feel satisfied protected, and make this life livable. And then, these instincts are these drives, engage us in actions that will sustain our lives.

Because unless we devise ways to sustain our lives, it would be very difficult for us to lead life because life will continue to have existential challenges. And we, as humans will continue to have existential concerns at every stage in life. So, it is very important that we understand how to sustain life through certain actions, and these are the instincts that engages in these actions that will help us sustain our lives.

At the same time, these instincts also inspire positive emotions in us. So, for example, state of happiness, love, affection, and a variety of other positive emotions, when those emotions are inspired in us, they are activated in us, we feel like behaving in a pro social manner. We belong to this society, we belong to people around us and we begin to show pro social behavior and cooperation. So, so we begin to live in cooperation with people around us. So, these are the instincts that help us do so.

On the other hand, when we look at the other types of instincts, we understand that those instincts are diametrically opposed to the life instincts therefore, they are called Death instincts or death drives. Life instincts produce certain kinds of energy in us that that are called libido. But unlike libido we do not have any such thing when we are visited by death instincts. Because death instincts are aimed at the destruction of life, they make us behave in an aggressive manner.

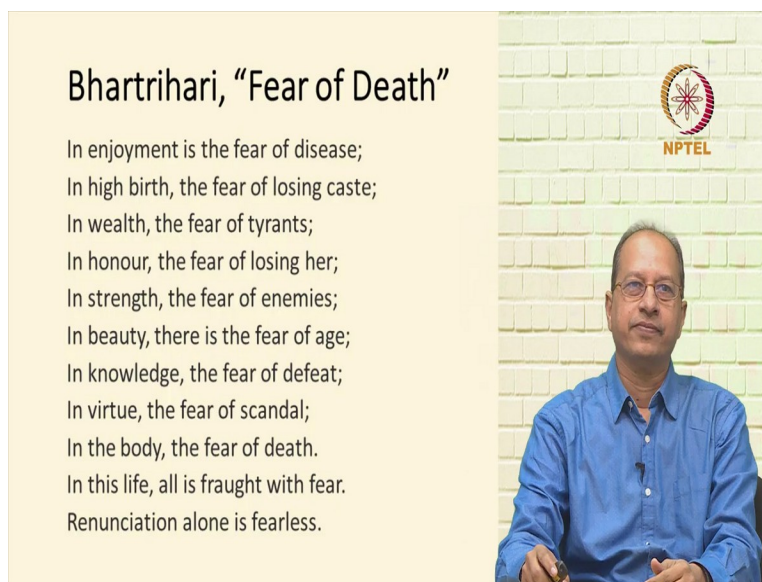
They make us cause harm and injury to others and to ourselves as well. Because most often, these death instincts that result in negative behavior, antisocial behavior, are directed towards the destruction of life or existence. So, we feel like destroying life, we are overpowered by these instincts that make us go out and destroy life, and they are so demotivating in nature, that they will never help us nurture this life.

And besides, they will also engage us in harmful actions, actions including causing harm, causing suffering, pain, and even, you know, killing people, enjoying them. And they also create all kinds of negative emotions like anger, even sadness, envy or jealousy. And we begin to engage in antisocial behavior. And we find ourselves in conflict.

So, life instincts, which lead us to pro social behavior, and co-operation, death instincts lead us to antisocial behavior and conflict. So, therefore, it is very, very important that we understand that death instincts are extremely powerful, they can destroy our lives. So, we will continue to live as long as we are in the safe mode. And we are inspired by life instincts. But as I have already told you that life instincts are those instincts that always require us to return to the Safe Mode through the activation of homeostatic drive, or desire.

So, that is the reason why we always move out and give it a chance, so that we can return to the Safe Mode through the enactment of our life instincts. So, that is all about life and death instincts.

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Bhartrihari, "Fear of Death"

In enjoyment is the fear of disease;
In high birth, the fear of losing caste;
In wealth, the fear of tyrants;
In honour, the fear of losing her;
In strength, the fear of enemies;
In beauty, there is the fear of age;
In knowledge, the fear of defeat;
In virtue, the fear of scandal;
In the body, the fear of death.
In this life, all is fraught with fear.
Renunciation alone is fearless.

Now, that brings us to these two interesting poems, the first of which is of Bhartrihari's Fear of Death. And I am going to focus on these lines. As a short poem, I am going to focus on the lines in the poem, in connection with the things that we have discussed so far, in connection with existential questions, existential concerns, existential anxiety, existential crisis, and how we can respond to those questions.

Because if we return to our discussion of the different drives, and different modes, we can understand that these are some of those basic emotions that make us feel either safe or unsafe, that helps us look forward to life or withdraw from life. So, these basic emotions are so strong and so powerful, that we cannot escape them. They continue to be with us, and they continue to come out, get aroused, and we experience them continuously.

And I have also told you that if we allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by one particular type of emotion, that might lead to problems whether it makes us feel safe or unsafe, it makes us act pro socially or anti socially. It helps us engage in cooperation or conflict. For example, many studies have found that those animals who are incapable of experiencing fear of death, they do not live long.

So, that clearly suggests that all these emotions irrespective of what they do to us, how they make us feel, irrespective of all these things, all these emotions are equally important. If happiness is a positive emotion because it makes us feel safe, satisfied, contented and on the other hand death is a negative emotion because it, it makes us feel disturbed, distressed, it does not mean that death is something that we need to avoid.

Even if we try to avoid, we cannot do so. Because it is so basic, so primal to our existence, we cannot do so, it will continue to be with us. In the same way fear. Although this title is not very popularly used for this particular segment, for the sake of our convenience, I have used this title fear of tests, because if you remember, when we talked about the big five existential concerns, or the Big four existential concerns as propounded by the Yalom, you know, that death happens to be the first.

So, death is the most basic of all existential concerns. So, it is very, very important that we understand the reality of death, and the fear, the concomitant fear of death. So, in a way, fear and death are so complimentary to each other, that we cannot separate them. So, fear is also basic to our understanding of different kinds of modes, the safe and the survival mode, because as long as we are not afraid, we feel very safe. The moment something makes us feel afraid, or we promptly switch to the survival mode, and we begin to feel unprotected, unsafe.

And then we experience a variety of effects, for example, anxiety, the heart pounding, racing of heart, and a variety of other things. So, let us take a look at this poem, and try to understand the

message that it tries to send to us. It has been successful in sending that message, all we need to do is to tap that message to understand the message so that we can enrich our understanding of our existential concerns, this existential anxiety, so that we can overcome the existential crisis through an informed way.

So, when you look at the first line, you will find that it is in enjoyment is the fear of disease, all through the word fear is repeated. Until the penultimate line, the word fear does not figure in the last line, because it tries to answer the question of fear. That is that is so overwhelming for our existence. Therefore, it has the answer to the question of fear, the last line and that is the reason why it does not figure the word fear.

Right from line one, to the penultimate line, you will find the use of the word fear. So, what kind of fear actually pushes us towards our existential crisis? Let us take a look at that, in enjoyment is a fear of races. I must also tell you that if as we move through the lines; we can try to understand the significance of each of these statements, each of these lines, in connection with the safe and the survival modes, in connection with the life and the death instincts.

In enjoyment is the fear of disease. So, in enjoyment, that means we are in safe mode, we are experiencing life drive, we are enjoying life, we feel safe, protected. And therefore, we are not disturbed. But there is something that still disturbs us. And that is the reason why I told you that we cannot guarantee a safe mode or a continuous safe mode for us that is impossible. Within the Safe Mode itself. There are the traces of the survival mode, or within life instincts. There are the traces of death drives or death instincts.

So, at times, it becomes extremely difficult for us to separate them. So, that is the reason. So, that is the pattern throughout the entire poem until the penultimate line that has been the pattern, when you see that. So, on one hand, we can see the Safe Mode or Safe Mode state, a certain type of life instinct, and on the other, we can see a survival mode, experience. And that, that tells us about death instincts or death drives.

So, in enjoyment, we do not enjoy completely, because we still experience fear, the fear of disease, we still experience that this particular situation is not going to be a permanent one. It is transitory, it is not going to be with us forever. So, it is not the, the quality of that particular state that makes us feel happy. But the transitory knows of that particular state, which makes us feel

bad about it. So, we try to understand the implications of that particular state, with its relation to its opposite. So, that is disease.

Similarly, in high birth, the fear of losing cast, in wealth, the fear of tyrants, in honor, the fear of losing her, losing honor, her, in strength, the fear of enemies, because if you think you are strong enough, and your enemies may prove you that you are wrong, your enemies may be stronger than you, you cannot guarantee that you are the strongest one, your enemies may be the strong. If that is the case, then you will be defeated.

In Beauty, there is a fear of age. So, because beauty is not permanent, it is always overwhelmed by your sense of getting wasted, and disappearing, or getting vanished. And it will be gradually destroyed by age. So, in knowledge, the fear of defeat, if you think you are knowledgeable, you are very, very intelligent, and nobody in this world can defeat you, you are maybe grossly mistaken, you may be wrong.

There may be people who are more knowledgeable than you. So, knowledge cannot ensure that will never be defeated. So, even when you know that you are knowledgeable, you are very very intelligent, you are still moved by the idea of defeat, you are still disturbed by the fear of defeat, in virtue, the fear of scandal, you may be very very virtuous. But you cannot guarantee that you will never ever find yourself in a scandal or in a scandalous situation.

So, that can be very, very scandalous. And then finally, in the body, the fear of death, that is the biggest of all existential fears. So, and in this life, all is fraught with fear that is the bottom line. In fact, before we move to the proposed solution, to these problems, these existential questions, this is the bottom line, in this life all is fraught with fear. Nothing is free from fear, everything is fraught with fear.

That means in the safe mode, there are the traces of the survival mode. So, while we continue to be in the safe mode, we also need to think about those situations or those conditions, when the safe mode will no longer be with us. And we will find ourselves in the survival mode, we must think about those conditions. When we need to act, we need to activate our homeostatic drive so that we can return to the Safe Mode again.

But again, that will be no guarantee that we will continue to be in the safe mode. You will again return to the survival mode. But you will activate your homeostatic drive again, and return to the safe mode. So, that is wonderful. Because as I told you, studies have found that animals, when they do not experience fear of death, they do not live long. So, that is very important. So, that has a very important answer to these questions, these existential questions.

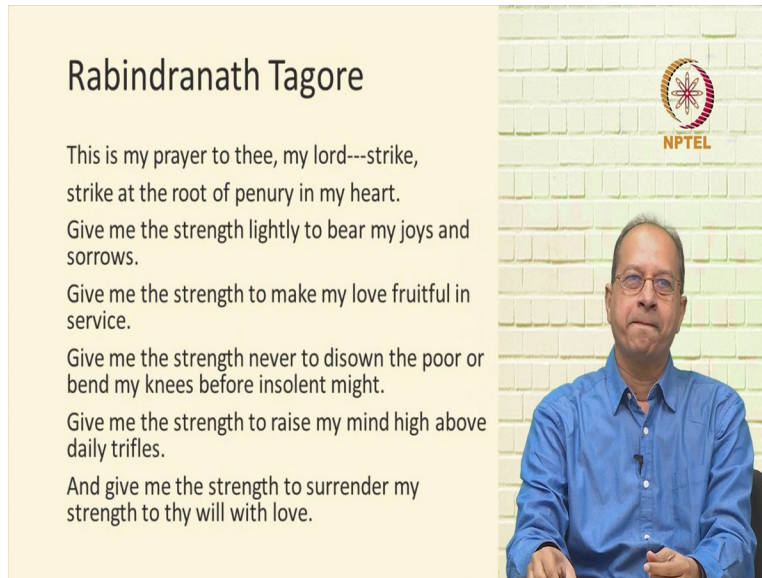
So, this life is fraught with fear, fear for loss, fear of death, fear of scandal, defeat, age, enemies, fear of disease, a variety of other things, and all these things are gradually taking us to those existential crises. But that is not in store for us, what is in store for us is something else. And what is that? That is renunciation, renunciation alone is fearless. That means we need not be very deeply attached with something with a certain state.

If we develop a kind of, you know, inseparable attachment, a very strong attachment with a certain type of state, that will lead to problems. So, when you look at each of these statements, starting with line one, you will find that we become attached to enjoyment. And when that happens, it brings in the fear of losing it, the fear of disease, when we are too obsessed, too attached to beauty, the idea of beauty that will definitely bring in the fear of age.

So, Bhartrihari, suggests a measure, and the measure is renunciation. So, when he says renunciation, he does not say that you become an ascetic, you leave everything, you do not take care of all these Safe Mode, emotions, or Safe Mode feelings or experiences, he does not mean that. And we do not have to figure it out in that manner.

He actually means to say that renunciation is a type of objective approach to the things that we experience in life. So, we need to approach these things, these experiences in an objective manner, so that we can try to understand their relevance and their implications for our existence.

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The slide is divided into two main sections. On the left, a light yellow background contains the title 'Rabindranath Tagore' in a bold, black font. Below the title, the text of a poem is presented in a standard black font, with each line of the poem on a new line. On the right, a man with glasses and a blue shirt is seated in front of a white brick wall. In the upper right corner of the slide, there is a circular logo with a red and white design, and the letters 'NPTEL' are printed below it.

Rabindranath Tagore

This is my prayer to thee, my lord---strike,
strike at the root of penury in my heart.
Give me the strength lightly to bear my joys and
sorrows.
Give me the strength to make my love fruitful in
service.
Give me the strength never to disown the poor or
bend my knees before insolent might.
Give me the strength to raise my mind high above
daily trifles.
And give me the strength to surrender my
strength to thy will with love.

So, with that, we can now switch to the other poem that I have picked, to connect with our ideas of existential concerns. So, this is again, very straightforward, very simple. You might have noticed in the previous poem, that there is a kind of repetition. And we all know that when something is repeated, that is reaffirmed, that is strengthened. So, Bhartrihari tries to strengthen the idea that we need to adopt an objective approach we cannot afford to be obsessed.

So, that idea has been reaffirmed or strengthened. Similarly, we also have an idea that is being strengthened or reaffirmed through the pattern of repetition. So, we get to see a similar pattern in this poem as well. So, what is that pattern, the pattern is give me strength. So, there is a brief introduction. This is my prayer to thee My Lord, strike, strike at the root of penury in my heart. That means all the problems in my heart, all kinds of problems in my heart, must be overtaken, must be overcome through this particular strike.

At times, I think I am very weak or helpless to do so, because I do not have that adequate strength. Therefore, the speaker is praying to God, the almighty to strike. And then, if you want me to do that, as I told you, this homeostatic drive, always makes us do things that will promptly take us back to the safe mode. So, if you want me to act, if you want me to do that then please give me strength, give me strength, so that I can bare my joys and sorrows.

That means I adopt similar approach towards my joys I am not obsessed with joys and sorrows. So, I can bare joys and sorrows equally well give me strength to make my love fruitful in service,

I have also told you that there is various basic emotions love is one such basic emotion, love affection. So, if love is not fruitful in service then it will go waste give me strength never to disown the poor and bend my knees before insolent might.


So, if you remember I talked about pro social behavior so this is an instance of that. So, life instincts, homeostatic is activated give me strength to raise my mind high above daily trifles so that I can focus on higher things the bigger goals in my life. Rather than engaging myself in daily trifles and then finally give me strength to surrender my strength to the thy will with love.

So, give me that strength so that I can surrender my strength because when it comes to taking care of variety of emotions we need to understand that we do not become obsessed with something that we have something that we possessed and that is the reason why Bhartrihari also say that renunciation is the best answer to all this fears of life, renunciation. So, that means if we are flexible, if we can easily for go for that particular thing and then reclaim it.

So, that is the kind of strength Tagore is seeking, that is the kind of Bhartrihari is also seeking. So, with that we come back to our idea of existential concerns, existential questions, existential anxiety, and existential crisis and the difference between safe and survival modes life instincts and death instincts all these are so closely connected with each other that we need to approach them quiet cautiously.

And I am sure these two poems might have helped you to look at those ideas from a fresh perspective and these poems might also have helped you also understand those ideas well. So, that is how we come to the end of this lecture, I am sure that you might have liked the things that I talked about today and I will promptly take you to references.


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References

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2. Montgomery, J. & Ritchey, T. (2010). The Answer Model: A new path to healing. Santa Monica, CA: TAM Books.
3. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-embodied-mind/201209/emotions-survival-and-disconnection>
4. <https://archive.org/details/BhartrihariNitiAndVairagyaShataka>
5. <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/give-me-strength/>



So, these are the sources from where most of the ideas used in the lecture have been borrowed. So, thank you very much for joining. In our next lecture I am going to talk about emotional wellbeing so that will take a step further towards our goal of literature and coping skills. So, thank you once again for joining.