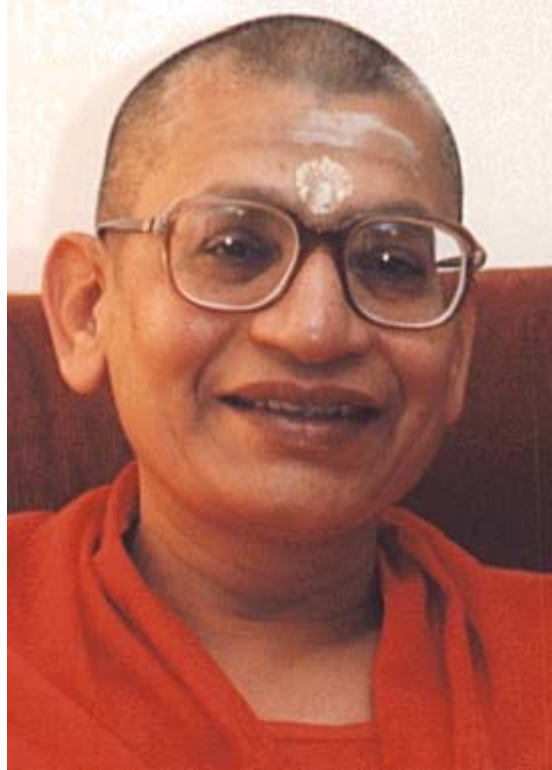


Karma Yoga: Duty, Destiny and Free will



Satsang

with

Swami Viditatmananda Saraswati

Arsha Vidya Gurukulam

<http://www.arshavidya.org>

Swami Veditatmananda Saraswati

Sri Swami Veditatmananda Saraswati, a disciple of Sri Swami Dayananda Saraswati, is an outstanding teacher of Vedānta. He expounds Vedānta with a simplicity and directness that make it easy to assimilate. Having studied and worked in the United States prior to becoming a sannyāsi, Swami Veditatmananda is familiar with the lifestyles of India as well as the West. With this insight, he reaches out to students across both cultures, with equal ease.

Swamiji is traditional in his teaching and preserves the entirety of the age-old wisdom of the Upanishads. He takes a contemporary approach in his lectures, which enables the student to relate to his teaching and imbibe this knowledge without effort.

Swami Veditatmananda is the resident teacher at Tattvatirtha, which is situated in the western outskirts of Ahmedabad in Gujarat. As the name suggests, it is a center for learning the Tattva, or truth, as revealed in the Upanishads and the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Apart from English, Swamiji teaches and writes in Gujarati as well. He also conducts management seminars with a view to illustrate the relevance of Vedānta in modern management.

Swamiji visits the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam at Saylorsburg, PA, every year, to conduct Vedānta classes and camps from spring through summer. At this time, he also travels all over the US and Canada delivering lectures.

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The Essence of Karma Yoga

Question

Swamiji, can you please summarize the essence of *karma yoga* presented in the 2nd Chapter of the *Bhagavad Gītā*?

Answer

After teaching Arjuna the *ātma-anātma-viveka* at the beginning of the 2nd Chapter of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Lord Krishna recognized the need to cultivate in Arjuna a certain frame of mind that would enable him to grasp and retain his teaching; a subtle and sensitive mind that enjoyed freedom from distractions, freedom from passions, freedom from likes and dislikes. Therefore, to teach Arjuna a method by which he could slowly make his mind free from the passions of likes and dislikes, the next topic of discourse of Lord Krishna was *Karma Yoga*.

*karmaṇyev'ādhikāraṣṭe mā phaleṣu kadācana
mā karmaphalaheturbhūrmā te sango'stvakarmaṇi*

Your choice is in action only, never in the results thereof. Do not be the author of the results of action. Let your attachment not be to inaction. [BG 2-47]¹

Karmaṇi ev'ādhikārah. We have *adhikāra*, or choice, over action; it is our duty to perform action. *Mā te sango'stvakarmaṇi.* Do not give up action; do not take to laziness.

It is our duty to perform action. Duty means a participation in the scheme of things where every human being has a certain assigned role. Lord Krishna elaborates on this topic in the 3rd Chapter. We must recognize that we are the recipients of the favor of the whole universe, which consists of both insentient and sentient beings, and we are what we are on account of this favor. The universe consists of other human beings, other creatures and different elements such as earth, space, air, water, fire, the sun, the moon, the stars, the planets, etc., and is constantly favoring us. As human beings, we enjoy many privileges and receive support from the rest of the creation because this is how the whole universe is designed. Therefore it becomes our responsibility to respond accordingly out of a sense of gratitude. I recognize how I am the recipient of the favor of

¹ BG = *Bhagavad Gītā*

the universe around me. For instance, even before I was born, preparations were made to provide me with what I needed, and I have since always been provided what I need. There is provision for the needs of all the creatures in this universe. The enjoying of all these privileges must invoke a sense of gratitude in me, and therefore, participating in the scheme of things and performing action in the spirit of offering is the duty of every human being.

Lord Krishna says:

*dūreṇa hyavaraṃ karma buddhiyogāddhanañjaya
buddhau śaraṇamanviccha kṛpaṇāḥ phalahetavaḥ*

Action (based on desire) is therefore far inferior to that performed with the proper attitude (*karma yoga*). Seek refuge in this *buddhi* (having the proper attitude), O Arjuna. Those who perform action only for the results are misers. [BG 2-49]

We have the freedom to perform action with any kind of objective or purpose in mind. We do have the freedom to perform an action for personal gain, and as long as it is in keeping with the values, it is acceptable. But better than that is to perform action for the gain or well being of totality, or in other words, for *Īśvara* or the Lord. Perform all action in the spirit of worship to the Lord, in the spirit of it being an offering to the Lord, an offering to the totality. When we observe the scheme of things in the universe, we find that every individual component, such as for instance, the sun, the moon or the earth, is dedicated to the well being of the totality and functions in the spirit of offering itself to the totality. If all the members comprising a group work for the well being of the entire group, all of them are going to be taken care of. On the other hand, if the members of a group function for the sake of their own selves, there will only be competition and selfishness and perhaps all of them will end up hurting each other. This is a very practical way to look at things. In the 3rd Chapter, Lord Krishna says:

*devān bhāvayat 'ānena te devā bhāvayantu vaḥ
parasparaṃ bhāvayantaḥ śreyaḥ paramavāpsyatha*

Propitiate the deities with this (*yajña*). May those deities propitiate you. Propitiating one another, you shall gain the highest good (*mokṣa*). [BG 3-11]

You propitiate the *devatās*, the universal forces. You perform action to satisfy the nature, satisfy the universe, satisfy the various *devatās*. Just as we have our needs, the

whole universe has its needs, and therefore may we perform actions in harmony with the law or order obtaining in the universe. This is being sensitive to the ecological balance of the environment. Perform action in this spirit. *Te devā bhāvayantu vaḥ*, or those *devatās* in turn, will propitiate you. *Parasparam bhāvayantaḥ śreyaḥ param avāpsyatha*, propitiating one another, you shall gain the highest good (*mokṣa*). Lord Krishna teaches the spirit of cooperation rather than the spirit of competition. Competition involves violence. When everybody cooperates, everyone gets served. When everybody competes, everybody hurts everyone else. There is cooperation among all the elements comprising the universe. And therefore may the human beings also function in the same spirit of cooperation. Even if we don't worry about the entire universe, we can be concerned about human society, or at least the place where we are and where we work as part of a group. Let there be a spirit of cooperation. Only then will all of us serve and be served in turn.

Lord Krishna teaches what we call non-attachment or detachment towards personal rewards. When I perform an action merely for my personal reward, there is the likelihood that it will compromise somebody else's rights. When I dedicate it to the achieving of my personal goals, I may violate someone else's goal. This is the vision and it is not easy to follow. Most of us may not follow it because our needs may not allow us to do so. But we should at least understand this vision. Then we will know where all our stress comes from! If we violate this principle, we also get violated. So it is not as if we can get away with it.

Pujya Swami Dayanandaji always says that if you violate *dharma*, you get violated as well. *Dharma* is followed when the whole universe functions in a spirit of cooperation. If a person chooses to function in the spirit of competition, where self-centeredness and personal interests alone count, it will result in conflict in spite of prosperity. There are tremendous conflicts and stresses that people suffer from, because the very basis, on which we are accumulating prosperity, is wrong.

Sahayajñāḥ prajāḥ sṛṣṭvā puro'vāca Prajāpatiḥ, in the beginning, the Creator, created human beings along with *yajñā* [BG 3-10]. *Yajña* means the attitude of offering. *Yajña* can also be translated as sacrifice. Sacrifice may scare us away and, so let us say it is the attitude of offering. The principle of *yajña* was created for human beings. No

other living beings need any instructions. They do not have the freedom of choice and therefore they automatically follow the harmony of the universe. They never violate this harmony. Human beings are provided with the freedom of will so that we can grow. Other creatures are not provided with this freedom and therefore, they cannot grow. Human beings can also violate this freedom. They have the freedom to destroy the ecological order and any other order they come into contact with. Freedom is something about which we must be very careful. If freedom is properly utilized, it can be a blessing and if it is abused, it can be a curse. Thus the human being has a choice to either bless himself or to curse himself.

We require the scriptures to tell us what our values should be so that we may bless ourselves, and what we should avoid so that we do not hurt ourselves. This is what the *Bhagavad Gītā* teaches us. I recognize the fact that I am the recipient of favor and must therefore return the favor. In fact when I perform action in the spirit of offering, I am not doing anybody a favor. I am merely returning the favor that I am already enjoying, and in doing so, I am only doing myself a favor, because otherwise I will hurt myself.

*yajñārthāt karmaṇo 'nyatra loko 'yaṁ karmabandhanaḥ
tadārthaṁ karma kaunteya muktasaṅgaḥ samācara*

This world (of people) is bound by karma performed other than the action (performed) as an offering. For this reason, O Arjuna, perform action for the sake of that (as an offering), being one free from attachment. [BG 3-9]

Lord Krishna teaches that any action performed in a spirit other than that of offering or sacrifice, is binding, while action performed in the spirit of an offering releases me from this bondage. There is thus, a way of functioning, which is binding, and a way of functioning, which makes me free. I have to make a choice between whether I want freedom or bondage in my life.

Samatvaṁ yogā ucyate, this evenness of mind is called yoga [BG 2-48]. Lord Krishna offers a very important formula, which is really a *sutra*, an aphorism. He teaches *samatvaṁ*, or sameness of the mind. Whatever we confront is devoid of sameness. No two persons are the same, no two things in this universe are the same. In the midst of all this variety and diversity, Lord Krishna says, “May you learn to maintain sameness of the mind!” How to do this? With reference to action, every action is different from every

other action, so what can sameness in action be? Similarly, every result is different from every other result. So what can sameness in the result be?

Sameness in action is that every action is performed in the same spirit of offering. The sameness in result is that I accept every result or reward with the same attitude, as being the *prasāda*, the grace of the Lord. Lord Krishna asks us to develop this spirit of sameness. In course of time, we become prepared to appreciate the sameness, which is the absolute truth.

The absolute truth is that there is an underlying unity that informs all the apparent diversity around us. In the many-ness there is oneness. Lord Krishna says, *mayi sarvamidam protaṃ sūtre ma ṇigaṇā iva*, all this is woven (has its being) in me, like a cluster of beads in a string [BG 7-7]. All the flowers that make a garland are supported by one thread. The thread is not visible, but if it were not there, all the flowers would be scattered away. We only see the flowers. But then, without the thread, the flowers cannot be where they are. Similarly, what we see is all this diversity around us, but this diversity cannot be, unless there is a unity keeping it all together. Thus there is unity in diversity. In the many, there is one. This is what we call ‘God’ or the ‘Self’. It is this Self that we have to strive to realize. To become free from grief or sadness, I should recognize that I am the Self of all. I must know that sameness or oneness is but the nature of my own Self. When I come to know this truth, there is no question of any grief at all.

But before I come to appreciate the absolute principle, I must cultivate sameness in a relative sense, in my day-to-day living. How do I cultivate this sameness? I learn to look upon everybody as the children of God, as nothing else but the manifestation of God. Whatever I do and whenever I interact with the world, I look upon it as though I am interacting with the Lord. When I receive a response from the world in my interactions, I look upon it as a response coming from the Lord. I look upon it as his grace. Therefore my duty is one of worshipping, one of offering, one of serving.

siddhyasiddhyoḥ samo bhūtvā samatvaṃ yoga ucyate

Remain the same to success and failure alike. This evenness of mind is called yoga. [BG 2-48]

When you perform an action there will be either success or failure. Accept both of them in the same spirit. Success is a gift of God and failure also is a gift of God. How can failure be a gift of God? This is because, what I take to be failure, may also have some hidden benefit. Therefore, I give the benefit of the doubt to God. Whatever comes to me, I receive in the spirit of *prasāda* or graceful acceptance. This is how *samatvaṃ* or sameness of mind is to be slowly cultivated in our day-to-day living. This sameness of the mind is called *yoga*.

Yogaḥ karmasu kauśalam, karma yoga is discretion in action [BG 2-50]. There is *kauśalam* or skill involved in the performing of any action. What is this skill? The skill is the attitude of the action as an offering to the Lord, and the acceptance of its result with an equanimity or sameness of mind. Therefore when you perform an action, let it be an offering to the Lord, and when you receive the result, receive it as *prasāda* or gift of God. In *Karma Yoga*, Lord Krishna teaches the attitude of *samatvaṃ*. In *Jñāna Yoga*, he teaches *samatvaṃ* as being the *ātmā*, or the very principle.

nityaṃ ca samacittatvam iṣṭāniṣṭopapattiṣu

..and always evenness of mind regarding the gain of the desirable and the undesirable... [BG 13-9]

Maintain an evenness of mind when you come across both favorable and unfavorable situations. They are, but the manifestations and indeed the gift, of the Lord. Thus, does Lord Krishna teach the *Karma Yoga* in the middle of the 2nd Chapter. In *Karma Yoga*, we cultivate this sameness of mind in our day-to-day living in the midst of all the diversity we encounter and in the midst of all the unfavorable situations we confront. The practice of *samatvaṃ* will eventually lead us to the appreciation of the underlying sameness as being God, and the recognition of this being the Self.

Karma Yoga in Day-to-Day Life

Question

How do I apply Vedānta in my day-to-day life? What is the role of devotion or worship in the scheme of things?

Answer

All human beings are qualified to discover and understand that freedom is within them. By ourselves, we are free. How is it that we do not feel so? Ignorance deprives us of feeling that we are essentially free, and creates a wrong perception that we are bound. This results in misery. So ignorance is the problem. And knowledge, the knowledge of the Self, is the solution. So we understand both the problem and the solution.

All misery or sadness is a product of the ignorance of the ‘Self’, and the solution is to discover the true nature of the ‘Self’. This knowledge or awareness means ‘a coming to oneself’: a focusing of attention on oneself, a slow and progressive shifting away of the focus from things other than oneself. This is how the process of life should be. When we say, “Remove the focus from elsewhere”, it does not mean that one should reject other things or run away from other things. It means, slowly become free from the attachment or dependence on other things and beings.

At the moment, we find ourselves to be totally dependent on the beings and things of the world for our happiness. We are dependent upon our performance and success, for feeling good about ourselves. In reality, the only place where happiness exists is within the Self. As long as we look out and chase the success and happiness in the notion that they are elsewhere, we are denying our essential selves. It would be alright if indeed success and happiness were elsewhere, but it is not so.

Any attempt on my part to look for happiness elsewhere is but a denial of me, a disrespecting of me, a disowning of me. Therefore we should look for the happiness within ourselves. The process of chasing various ends outside of oneself is even seen as being self-damaging and self-hurting. The *Īśavasya Upanishad* says that those who chase the pleasures and success outside of themselves injure or hurt themselves:

*asuryānāma te lokā andhena tamas’āvṛtāḥ
tāms te prety’ābhigacchanti ye ke c’ātmahano janāḥ*

Those worlds of devils are covered by blinding darkness. Those people that kill the Self go to them after giving up this body.
[*Īśavasya Upanishad*, 3]

Having understood this, how should we live our life? We would let our life to become a process of accepting ourselves, owning up ourselves, respecting ourselves.

If happiness is not to be found outside, what do I need to do? Action is the means of achieving what I do not have, whereas knowledge is the means of recognizing what I already am. If freedom or happiness is my very nature, knowledge is the solution for discovering the fact that I am the happiness or freedom that I am searching for. Action cannot make me the owner of what I already am! Does it mean that I should drop everything that I am doing? Does it mean that *karma*, or action, has no role to play in my life? Does it mean that I should drop action -- activities, duties or responsibilities? That would be *sannyāsa* or renunciation of action. *Arjuna* also wanted to become a renunciate in this sense and Lord Krishna did not accept that.

We should first become renunciates in the sense that renunciation is really the maturity of the mind. Therefore let us first make our life a process of bringing about this maturity of the mind, becoming free from attachment, free from dependence, free from *rāga-dveṣa* (likes or attachment and dislikes or aversion), becoming free from *kāma* (lust), *krodha* (anger) and *lobha* (greed), which drive our minds away from ourselves.

Action is generally a means of achieving what is not. However, action can also become a means of achieving what is already achieved. The *Bhagavad Gītā* teaches that action can become a means of knowledge. Action may be performed not as a means of acquiring what we don't have, but in a spirit of offering. This way, we perform our actions and duties in a responsible manner befitting our dignity, not for achieving what we don't have, but for owning up what we are.

Today, before I perform an action, I ask the question, "What am I going to get out of it?" I seek gratification of my ego, I seek a personal reward. Performing an action with a certain purpose in mind is quite acceptable because no action can be performed without a purpose. Sometimes people do not recognize the difference between attachment to the fruit of the action and the purpose of the action. They think that performing an action without attachment to the fruit of the action means performing the action without a concern about whether it will bring about a particular end or not.

For example, shooting of an arrow to hit the target is a worthy purpose. Now, there are two aspects of the result of the action. One aspect is whether or not the arrow hits the target. The other is how I react to the result. So, what happens after the arrow hits the target or does not hit the target is also very important. This is where the 'I' or the ego comes in. If the arrow hits the target and I feel I am successful, there is ego gratification. On the other hand if the arrow does not hit the target, I feel miserable and I feel that I am a failure. It is in our reaction, Lord Krishna says, that we should become free from attachment. Do not become indifferent to the result in the sense that, while shooting the arrow, you don't care where the arrow falls. You should care where the arrow falls and therefore, shoot the arrow in the right direction, with the right strength. After the arrow falls, accept the result gracefully and do not take credit or discredit for it. Instead, give it where it belongs.

The credit for the action belongs to the Lord by whose grace you could perform the action and by whose laws the result of the action has come. We are instruments in the hands of the Lord and therefore should neither congratulate nor condemn ourselves. This is what is meant by being detached from the results of the action.

We should look upon ourselves not as the agent of the action, but as an instrument of the action, and consider it a privilege that I have the opportunity to perform the action, whatever it may be. There are, therefore, two aspects involved in performing an action. One is to achieve the external end. The other is to accept the result gracefully as the grace, or the gift of the Lord whether the result is favorable or not.

Best is to keep away from judging the result as either favorable or unfavorable, as success or failure. The healthy frame of mind is to accept it as being the right result in accordance with the scheme of things. Drop off the identification with the result wherein we see ourselves as a success or a failure. Drop off the ego that we possess while performing any action. We should consider our action as a contribution to the larger scheme of things and be thankful for the privilege of doing so. We should cultivate the *Īśvara-arpaṇa buddhi*, which is the spirit of performing an action as an offering to the whole universe and thus as an offering to the Lord. We are, after all, recipients of the favors of the world and should perform any action with a sense of gratitude as in returning the favor.

We should strive to lead a life in accordance with the values of non-violence, honesty, truthfulness and fairness. This requires that we let go of our impulses. There is the impulse to violate, to be dishonest, to tell lies, to cut corners, to take shortcuts. We would like to jump the red light or take the illegal U-turn to save time. It seems okay as long as nobody is watching. There are temptations in life. Self-control comes into play when we respect the value that disciplining the mind is more valuable than some temporary gain that comes when we fall for a temptation, that immediate gratification does not justify violation of laws. This is what we call a life of values. We can be sure that when we do something right or something good, gratification has to come now or later. Good begets good and evil begets evil. We should go ahead and do what we have to do. This is the life of *karma yoga*. It brings about emotional maturity and freedom from the grip of likes and dislikes, lust, anger and greed. We will slowly gain a mind that is more composed and more abiding in ourselves: a mind that becomes prepared for higher knowledge.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* explains that the mind is made up of three dispositions: *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. *Sattva* is a disposition in which the mind is calm, tranquil, contemplative and learning. *Rajas*, is a disposition in which the mind is agitated, projecting and seeking gratification. *Tamas* is a disposition in which the mind has no initiative; it is dull and does not want to do anything. We have to slowly transform our mind from *tamas* to *rajas* and from *rajas* to *sattva*. This transformation is a process. The first step is to commit to performing the duties of life that are expected of us, and do what the situation calls for. This way we will become active and pass from *tamas* to *rajas*. Further, we seek to perform the duty not for the sole gratification of the ego but in a spirit of offering, thus moving from *rajas* into *sattva*. In course of time the mind gains a *sāttvic* disposition, becomes tranquil and contemplative. The mind discovers a love for knowledge and gains emotional maturity. The very mind that wanted *bhoga* or gratification, now wants knowledge.

A desire that arises in the mind is based upon the disposition of the mind. A mind under the control of *rajas* desires gratification and a mind under the control of *sattva* desires knowledge. As the mind becomes *sāttvic*, we discover happiness or satisfaction within ourselves, resulting into self-acceptance, and a comfort with our essential selves.

We find that we are less and less dependent upon external things and beings for our gratification. In a mind that is pure, we find joy because the *ātmā*, the Self, is the very nature of happiness. Performing our duty thus becomes a requisite for shaping and preparing the mind for knowledge. When the mind is transformed, it has become *sāttvic*, we can drop action. That is renunciation of action, which follows renunciation of *rajas* and *tamas*.

Why the renunciation of action? It is done, so that the mind is available for pursuing knowledge, full-time regardless of stage in life. *Svādhayāyān mā pramadah*, never swerve from learning the scriptures [*Taittirīya Upanishad*, 1-11]. . . As a renunciate, I am free to totally dedicate myself to study. Emotional maturity can also be said to be the leisure of the mind. When the mind becomes free of distractions and is available to sit at the feet of the teacher, we can practice *śravaṇam* or listening to the scriptures, *mananam* or reflecting upon them, and *nididhyāsanam*, meditation, assimilate and own up what we have learnt. This process culminates in knowledge and an abiding in that knowledge.

The solution to the problem, then, is that we should live a life of worship or devotion. In fact this is no different from being a *Karma Yogi*. Devotion is very important in our life. Devotion is love. When you are in love, there is a natural desire to please the one you love and you do things to make them happy. There cannot be love without caring. Devotion to the Lord is the same. It is the living of life in a manner that will please the Lord, living a life of values. Hinduism offers a variety of *devatās* or deities. If we are devoted to a particular deity, whenever we perform any action, we should remember to dedicate it to that deity, as in ‘May my chosen deity be pleased by this action, may this action be accepted by the deity’. One can either choose an *iṣṭa devatā* or perform action as an offering to the universal Lord.

Worship can be specific and be performed at home or in a temple by way of rituals or by the chanting of *stotras* in praise of the Lord. Further, worship can be performed at the physical level, at the level of the mind or at the level of speech. The role of worship is to please the Lord. When He is pleased, He becomes favorable to us. When He becomes favorable, we acquire His grace. Grace of God is very important. We are limited, and therefore we require His grace. Even a person pursuing knowledge is

beset with many problems. There are impulses within me that come in the way of what I want to do. In seeking freedom from them, so that my path becomes smoother, I need the help of the Lord. The Upanishad says that the one who chooses the Lord, is chosen by Him. Devotion means choosing the Lord as the very goal of life and dedicating whatever I do, to him. This does not happen in one day. It happens progressively. This is the role of devotion or worship in our lives, and this is the process that will ultimately lead us to knowledge.

Question

What is the role of faith in *karma yoga*?

Answer

When we perform an action, we get a corresponding result. The way in which the effect comes to you, as well as the time when it comes to you, are both important. What you get, is always in correspondence with what you did. This is our trust, *śraddhā*. The scriptures say that there is fairness, but that is a matter of faith. We have our own definition of what fairness is, and very often we do not find that fairness. This is where trust or faith comes in. Even if I did not get what I thought I deserved, if I trust that there must be fairness because there is a higher intelligence, which knows what is right and what is wrong, then I can accept the outcome gracefully. This graceful acceptance or *prasāda buddhi* is possible only when there is faith. Further, God is benevolent, He is kind, He is our well-wisher. This is also a matter of faith. God is not merely a dispenser of the results of actions. He is not merely a judge who just gives you results in accordance with what you have done. He is benevolent, and He wishes us well. And He gives us results at a time and in a manner that is conducive to our growth. This is trust. Lord Krishna says, *suhṛdam sarva-bhūtānām*, I am the well-wisher of all beings [BG 5-29].

Question

Vedic Society was based on the notion of non-competition. But we live today in the United States where aggressive competition is the norm. So how does one cope with the competitive system, survive, and be happy?

Answer

This is a very practical question. It is unfortunately true, that human society has adopted competition as a way of motivating a person. What this market-oriented economy wants is not only to motivate the person, but also to compel him to produce his very best. This creates in him, insecurity, which then drives him to do his best, or it invokes the greed in him that makes him desire more and more. Thus, what we are doing is really invoking the baser instincts of human beings, their spirit of greed, aggressiveness and violence, and creating for human society, what is called animal rule or the survival of the fittest. This is a violent way of doing things.

Competition is violent while cooperation is non-violent. What competition means is that I must do better than someone else and in the process of achieving my objective, it very often does not matter if it is done at the cost of someone else. Everybody is always under threat. The big fish is constantly trying to swallow the small fish and the bigger fish trying to swallow the other. Nobody knows when he will be swallowed. Therefore, this whole atmosphere causes a lot of stress. I think that the stress due to competition contributes significantly to the general level of stress.

I wish that we could create an atmosphere where the goodness of the person was invoked, where his kindness or generosity was invoked, where a spirit of cooperation was invoked, where a person uses his strength to protect the weak rather than to exploit the weak. Then there would be harmony in the society. But we don't have that. This competitive society is a very effective system for extracting the most out of a person but I do not know if this is necessarily a healthy atmosphere. I don't think it is. As far as the emotional health of the person is concerned, I do not think that this is an effective system.

In short, material prosperity is at the cost of what we call spiritual prosperity; at the cost of the tranquility or peace of the mind; at the cost of happiness. The person becomes less and less capable of enjoying what he gets. And, therefore, in my opinion, I

do not think this is the way the society should really function, because this only invokes violence.

However, now that I am in a competitive society, I have to fend for myself. I have to protect myself. Basically, I do not think that competition is required, or that I have to compete with somebody. All that I need to do is to do my best. Why is it necessary for me to be better than someone else? Why is it necessary that I should get ahead of or farther than someone else? Why should I not simply be good? Why should I not be the best that I can be? This means that I make a commitment to be my best, and cultivate my abilities to the maximum extent and perform my action in the best possible way there is. Everybody should be the best that they can be and produce the best that they can. I think that we don't have to compete with anybody, we don't have to compare ourselves with anybody and we do not have to judge ourselves by the standards of somebody else.

What Lord Krishna teaches is that I may judge myself by the action that I perform. The excellence of the action is more important than the excellence of the result. And therefore may I judge myself by the excellence of my effort. The effort and the process are more important than the outcome. "But, Swamiji, even if I do not judge myself that way, the world judges me by the outcome." It is true that the world gives importance to the outcome. But as we have been saying, may I judge myself based on the effort that I make, the effort that I put in, rather than the outcome because the outcome is something that I cannot control.

However, when I live in this world, I see that my efficiency and effectiveness are judged by the result rather than by my effort, and therefore I have to definitely take the result into account. But I need not fall into the trap of using my strength to exploit the weak. That is, while functioning in a competitive society, I do protect myself in the sense that I do not allow somebody to hurt me. I do not allow somebody to trample upon my rights. But at the same time, I need not trample upon the rights of others. I need not hurt others.

The competitive system expects from me the very best that I can give. Therefore, number one, I make the commitment to do the best that I can do, number two, I do not allow others to hurt me, and number three, I try not to hurt others.

Fairness of Karma

Question

Is the Law of *Karma* fair?

Answer

Yes, it is fair. *Karma* is the law of cause and effect, and the effect is always in keeping in with the cause. However, we feel very often, that we are not rewarded in proportion to our efforts. Sometimes we also feel that injustice is done to us - the world is not fair to us; my boss is not fair to us; my spouse is not fair to us - so many people are not fair to us!

We do not know what is the cause of what we are experiencing right now. Let me dwell upon this point a little because this is a frequently asked question. “Look at this fellow, Swamiji. He has not done anything but he got a promotion. He is dishonest but he is rising up.” We do not know whether the rising of this person is due to dishonesty or due to something else.

Let me give you an example, an old-fashioned example. Imagine a farmer raising different crops in different seasons. In the monsoon he grows rice and there is a harvest of rice. He plants wheat in the winter and there is a harvest of wheat. After that he plants millet and there is a harvest of millet. Imagine that he has a big storage bin. As each harvest comes in, he dumps the grain in the bin. After the monsoon harvest, he dumps rice in there. Then after the next harvest, he dumps wheat into the bin. After the final harvest, he dumps millet in it. At the bottom, there is an opening from where he draws his grain. Now, what we find him doing is that he is dumping millet on top. But, wait a minute—what is this? When he opens the bin at the bottom, he gets rice! I see him putting in millet and I see him getting out rice. It doesn't seem to be rational, is it not? But he gets rice because that is what he had put in earlier. And a day will come when he will get his millet too.

Similarly, we may find somebody progressing at this time. It is quite possible that this progress is due to the result of some actions he may have done in the past. And whatever the person is doing now, he is surely accountable for that as well. We do not say that one should be punished, but the idea is that one is accountable for what one does.

Good begets good and evil begets evil. This is the law and that is what we call the law of *karma*, the law of cause and effect. There is nothing mysterious about this law. It is simply the law of cause and effect that science explains to us, except that science is confined to what we call the physical world. The law of *karma* is a moral law, which takes into account not only the physical reality, but the emotional, intellectual, and moral realities as well. In *karma*, every input is taken into account.

But as I say, there is fairness. We may not be able to perceive that fairness because our knowledge is limited. We can either see only in terms of the present time, or we know of a certain span of time. But we should know that my existence did not begin with this birth. It has been there from time immemorial. We should also know that my existence is not going to come to an end with death, but is surely going to continue for long beyond. And, therefore, there will be evenness in course of time. In a lifespan of fifty years or a hundred years, we may feel that fairness is not evident. But think of the span of a thousand years, two thousand years, or even five thousand years. What is a hundred years or even a few hundred years in the grand scheme of things? Very little. For us, they are very long periods of time, but as far as the universe is concerned, it is very little. When you have the total view, you find that things are in order. From an individual point of view, we may find that things are not all right.

When there is a painting in front of me and I go very close to it and peer at it through a magnifying glass, I only see blobs! Only when I step back and have an overall view can I see the beauty and the harmony in the painting. Similarly, in life, only when we have a larger view can we see the order. When we have a restricted view, there appears to be disorder. There may be a local disorder, but it is within the scope of the larger order. This is how fairness has to be understood. If fairness were not there, the world could not survive. The very fact that the world survives means that there is fairness, except that fairness may take a thousand years or perhaps a few thousand years, for things to work themselves out. We can see how history actually illustrates this fact. We find that what was done five hundred years ago is repaid now, and what is done now may be repaid later on. But ultimately everything evens out.

Is *karma* fair? Yes, it is. You can rest assured that no good act goes unrewarded. Someone has said that no good deed goes unpunished. It is not so. No good act ever

goes un-rewarded. And therefore, all you need to do is perform good actions. If you want to be happy, just be good, that's all.

Happiness does not come from any specific thing or by any specific means. It doesn't come from anything. It cannot be bought with money. Happiness is always the result of one's past good actions. What we call *sukham* or happiness is the result of *punya karma*, and *dukham* or unhappiness is the result of *pāpa karma*.

Therefore, I can live in a hut and be a happy person or I can live in a palace and be a miserable person. Whether I am happy or unhappy has nothing to do with what is around me. It has to do with me, the person. What is important in life is what I *am* and not so much what I *have*. So let us focus our attention on what we are and what we should have will be taken care of. Even if it is not, it should not matter. What matters is what I am, because, again, happiness is determined by what I am and not by what I have. What I have is no doubt important for *vyāvahāra* (day to day life) but for the higher purpose of life, what is important, is the kind of person I am.

Therefore, understand that happiness is a state of mind, which is the result of *punya karma* or virtuous deeds. Unhappiness is also a state of mind that is the result of what we call, *pāpa* or, unbecoming action. Action performed in keeping with the order is called *punya karma*. Action performed in violation of the order is called *pāpa karma*. So let us do our best to perform actions in keeping with the order, which, as we have been saying, is an order of cooperation, order of helping, order of offering. Let us do the best that we can to achieve happiness and inner growth in ourselves. Let us avoid actions that violate the order, as much as we can. We can then appreciate the overall fairness in our lives.

Question

Swamiji, you mentioned that the *Bhagavad Gītā* declares that outer prosperity or wealth comes to a spiritual person. But I see some noble and good people who are very poor and suffering, and don't seem to have the wealth. How do we reconcile this with what you said?

Answer

“I see some noble, good people who are very poor and suffering.” Suffering is a reaction to the obtaining situation and a person who is spiritually mature would not suffer on account of lack of resources, because what is meant by spiritual growth or emotional maturity is to be able to see the grace of Lord in whatever there is. When we say that material wealth or prosperity also comes to a person who pursues spiritual wealth, of course it comes according to one’s own *prārabdha*. Everybody has their own *prārabdha* or destiny, and therefore, what we achieve in terms of wealth or name and fame is always going to depend upon our *prārabdha*. Therefore, there cannot be a rule that just because a person is pursuing spiritual prosperity, and gains inner purity, he will necessarily be a millionaire. I would not expect such people to be poor, also. I think that they would be reasonably provided for in their lives.

It is often said that those who are honest always suffer and those who are dishonest seem to prosper. It is not as if just because a person compromises his values and is dishonest, he is necessarily prosperous, or that a person who follows the values is necessarily poor. There is no such rule! I think that there are many honest people who are prosperous, as well as many dishonest people who are not prosperous.

Very often we attribute our lack of success to an observation that it is because I am honest that I am not successful. This sentiment is more a statement of frustration on the part of one who is not very successful. A general conclusion seems to be that if you are an honest person, you are more likely to be left out of progress and remain poor whereas if you’re dishonest, you can make progress. In order to be successful, and perhaps to be prosperous, I also require some things other than honesty. I require certain knowledge; I require certain skills; I require some abilities. Not only am I required to be a good person, but I am also required to be a good doctor, a good engineer, or a person having some basic skills. The material prosperity, therefore, comes as a result of both goodness and skill. And the return that I get is going to be commensurate with goodness and the abilities that I have. So there is no doubt that in *vyāvahāra* or in the day-to-day life, we do require the abilities, called hard skills. The goodness would be called soft skills.

The idea is, that when I cultivate a mind that is composed, a mind that enjoys a certain tranquility and objectivity, I am more likely to be able to judge a situation properly, and also more likely to make decisions properly. That is how I am more likely to be an efficient person in whatever I am doing. But naturally, my income, etc., are going to be in keeping with whatever it is that I do. Lord Krishna says, “Skill in action is yoga” [BG 2-50]. What this means is that the performance of an action with the attitude of yoga, is itself considered a skill. It gives one a certain tranquility of mind, and also, a balance of mind. Thus the person who has the attitude of *yoga* also is going to be more skillful and efficient in what he or she does, when compared to a person who does not have that attitude. One can maintain equanimity in situations that are not favorable. Also, in being this way, one is not a reactive person but a more objective person. A non-reactive mind is more likely to be effective in any given situation than a reactive mind. This is why we say that if you pursue your inner growth or inner purity, you are going to be more efficient or more effective in whatever you do in your day-to-day life. It is in this sense that we said that the material prosperity follows spiritual prosperity. This does not mean that one need not make an effort to acquire the hard skills which also contribute to material prosperity.

For getting what you do not have, *karma* or effort is certainly required, but the effort is likely to be more effective if you are a person who enjoys a greater balance of mind, a non-reactive mind and a more objective mind. Thus, given two people who have the same set of abilities, the person who enjoys an objective mind is definitely going to be more effective and successful than the person who has a reacting mind.

Karma

Question

Swamiji, how do we know the right way of doing things?

Answer

The right way of doing things is to act in keeping with the basic values. It is that which creates in you, a sense of satisfaction. In interacting with a person, ask yourself, “If I were in the place of this person, what kind of treatment would I expect?” The right thing then would be to try to provide that treatment.

The idea of right and wrong is subjective. What to one person is right would be wrong to another. But there is something that is universally right, which is right for everybody. For example, being kind is universal, and so also being charitable. ‘Right’ is not a description of an action. Right is the attitude behind an action.

Sometimes you do something which you think is right, but the recipient thinks it is wrong. Then we have to figure out a way by which both can consider it right. Generally speaking, however, if in a given situation, whatever response the situation calls for, if you act out of kindness or in a kind manner, I do not think the other person will think it is wrong.

Question

What is the difference between spontaneous and habitual actions?

Answer

The *Bhagavad Gītā* talks about three kinds of persons. One is impulsive, the second is deliberate and the third is spontaneous. The impulsive person is a reacting person, one who acts out of impulse at the spur of the moment. This impulsiveness is often incorrectly called spontaneity. Even though the person appears to act spontaneously, at the spur of the moment, it is impulse that has driven the action. So, when a person acts out of impulse – e.g., anger, likes or dislikes -- it is called an impulsive action. A habitual action can also be called impulsive.

In deliberate action, these impulses are still there, but I do not submit to them and do what I think is the right thing to do. A person who acts deliberately is called a ‘*yogi*’.

Lord Krishna says, that the one who keeps the impulses of *kāma* and *krodha* in check until the body falls, is a *yogi*. *Sa yuktaḥ sa sukhī naraḥ*, he is a *yogi* and he is happy [BG 5-23]. Such a person is a seeker and an aspirant who deliberates in a manner that helps in his self-growth. It is such a person that the *Bhagavad Gītā* addresses.

Spontaneity is a result of a prolonged effort of deliberate action and doing the right thing. Over time, doing the right thing becomes our second nature and then our actions are spontaneously good. Such a person is one who automatically does what is right because he is free of likes and dislikes.

An impulsive person is not available to listen while a spontaneous person does not need to listen. An impulsive person is one who does not necessarily do what is right, while a spontaneous person is in tune with the order, and so his actions are in keeping with the order. And so, while an impulsive person is not capable of thinking and a spontaneous person does not need to think, a deliberate person is the one who thinks and is purposeful. If you are deliberate in your actions, over course of time, it becomes your habit and your nature and you become a spontaneous person.

Question

What is *nishkāma karma*?

Answer

Nishkāma means without any *kāma* or desire. If I don't have any *kāma* in performing the actions, it means that I am offering my actions to the Lord for his pleasure. For seekers, *nishkāma karma*, or action performed without a selfish desire, becomes a means of self-purification. *Nishkāma karma* is *bhakti*.

Nishkāma karma is necessary for the purification of the mind. Having gained the knowledge, whatever *karma* you do is *nishkāma karma* anyway. After that, one does not have one's own agenda, but responds to the agenda of others. You then become an instrument in the hands of nature or God, and become a part of the overall scheme.

Question

Swamiji, can you please elaborate on actionlessness?

Answer

Arjuna did not want to fight. Instead, he wanted to renounce *karma* or action. Lord Krishna tells Arjuna that the only way to renounce *karma* is to first learn to perform *karma* properly. One has to perform action properly because it is this, which will help in ultimately being able to give up action entirely. If you give up action too early, you will neither have the benefits that accrue from performing action, nor the benefits that renunciation offers. For example, if you get a piece of sugarcane, squeeze out the juice first and then throw the remnant away. There is no point in discarding the entire piece of sugarcane. And when you have extracted the juice, do not keep holding on what is left over! In this manner, we should have the discrimination to know what to hold on to and what to give up. This *viveka* is what Lord Krishna teaches. Since Arjuna wanted to give up action prematurely, Lord Krishna teaches him how to perform action in order to gain the maturity needed for that.

Lord Krishna essentially points out that Arjuna does not have the freedom to give up action. Arjuna is confronted with a very difficult and painful situation. He wants to avoid pain and take the easy way out by renouncing action. Thus his motivation for renunciation is to avoid pain rather than gain the benefit of renunciation. Arjuna knows of *sannyāsīs* or renunciates, but does not understand what renunciation means or what he is supposed to do. He thinks that one becomes a *sannyāsī* merely by not performing action.

na karmaṇāmanārambhānnaiṣkarmyam puruṣo 'śnute

A person does not gain the state of actionlessness by the nonperformance of activities. [BG 3-4]

You cannot become actionless simply through the non-performance of action. Arjuna is equating the non-performance of action with actionlessness. Lord Krishna points out that actionlessness means freedom from the very need to perform action. This freedom from the need to act is one thing, and merely not acting is something very different. Therefore, even if you take *sannyāsa* formally, by your will or by your insistence, you cannot gain *mokṣa* because you cannot become a *sannyāsī* this way.

*na hi kaścitkṣaṇamapi jātu tiṣṭhaty akarmakṛt
kāryate hyavaśaḥ karma sarvaḥ prakṛtijairguṇaiḥ*

Indeed no one exists for even a second without performing action because everyone is made to perform action helplessly by the (three) qualities born of causal nature. [BG 3-5]

A person cannot be without performing some action or the other even for a moment, because there is always an inner restlessness, which will compel him to perform action. Therefore, until you become free from this inner compulsion, you have to channelize it in the form of proper action. If you simply stop performing action, the restlessness will continue to remain within.

*karmendriyāṇi saṁyamya ya āste manasā smaran
indriyārthānvimūdhātmā mithyācāraḥ sa ucyate*

The one, who controlling the organs of action, sits with the mind remembering the sense objects is deluded (and) is called a hypocrite. [BG 3-6]

Suppose a person has renounced action by will, and is trying to meditate upon God or the Self. He finds himself meditating upon only the objects of the world because his mind does not have the kind of tranquility that is required to withdraw from the worldly objects. He can close his eyes and control his sense organs, but he cannot control his mind because the mind is still under the control of *kāma* or his desires, and his *rāga-dveṣas* or likes and dislikes.

As long as *rāga-dveṣas* are there, one does not have the freedom to give up action. You must therefore, in the first place, perform *karma* with an attitude such that it becomes a means of getting rid of existing *rāga-dveṣas*. You cannot enjoy tranquility till you are free of *rāga-dveṣas* or at least free of the more pronounced *rāga-dveṣas*. You must attain a state of mind where you can deal with any remaining *rāga-dveṣas* without coming under their sway. It is only then that you can enjoy tranquility of mind and become totally dedicated to the pursuit of meditation upon the Self. Until then, perform action in the spirit of *yajña*.

Lord Krishna says that action performed in the spirit of *yajña* or sacrifice, becomes a means of getting rid of *rāga-dveṣas*, while action motivated by self-centered desires only accumulates more *rāga-dveṣas*. When we become progressively free of *rāga-dveṣas*, we are on the path to freedom and when we progressively accumulate more and more *rāga-dveṣas* we only advance up the path of bondage.

It is our *rāga-dveṣas* that cause inner restlessness and compel us to do various things. Perform action in the spirit of *yajña* and it will help you get rid of your *rāga-dveṣas*. It is then that you will attain the freedom to entirely give up action.

Duty

Question

In order to identify with my true Self, I need to let go of my association with what is not my true Self. But if I let go, then there is a risk of becoming passive and not doing my duties or roles. How do I guard against developing this lax attitude and at the same time make progress in realizing the true Self?

Answer

Letting go does not mean just giving up one's duties. Remember that we do not have the freedom to let go. We cannot 'give up' something. We do not even have the freedom to give up work. Lord Krishna says that we cannot remain idle even for a moment because there is something within us that prompts us to do something. As long as there is discomfort within the self, we do not have the freedom not to do something. Try that. Try not to do something. Try to be a 'simply-sitting person'. Pujya Swamiji Dayanandaji tells the story of the 'simply-sitting Swami' to illustrate this.

In a temple in South India, there was a simply sitting Swami. This Swami would come there everyday and simply sit before the Lord doing nothing and leave in the evening. Every day the temple gave him one measure of cooked rice from the *prasāda*. The administration changed and the new administrator who was looking into the accounts found that this Swami was not performing any duty. Therefore, he asked the people around him why this Swami was being given one measure of rice every day. They said, "We don't know. This is what we have been doing for a long time." The official then said, "Stop it. There is no reason to reward him because he does not contribute anything." The next day, the simply-sitting Swami did not receive his share of rice. He did not get his share of rice the following day as well. Concerned, he went to the office and asked what the matter was. They said, "The new administrator has found out that you are not doing anything, and that you are simply sitting. Therefore he recommended that you do not get any rice." The Swami said, "Well, I invite the new administrator to come and simply sit with me." The administrator thought it would be no big deal to sit simply. Therefore, he came and sat next to the Swami and said, "I will simply sit with you." The Swami sat and the administrator sat next to him. Soon the administrator started counting the number of tube lights there were. "Don't do that. Just simply sit",

said the Swami. Then the man started looking at their ropes, and started counting. “Don’t do that. Just simply sit,” the Swami said again. The man then started writing something with his fingers. “Don’t do that. Just simply sit,” he was told. Therefore, the man started looking around. “Don’t do that. Just simply sit,” the Swami admonished. Within five minutes, the new administrator was fed up and declared, “From now on the simply sitting Swami will get not one measure, but two measures of rice.” He had discovered how difficult it is not to do something.

It is not as if, we can actively ‘give up’ doing. The need must drop off by itself. Even though renunciation is understood as being the giving up of something, it is not so. It is more of a growing out of something.

Action is a necessity. It is the discomfort within us, our likes and dislikes, our restlessness and our agitation that seek expression. They have to be channeled into the form of action. If we do not do so, the discomfort will grow and make us more restless. We must direct this internal discomfort into action. However, if the action is performed not with the right attitude, then also the discomfort grows. This is what is happening in our lives. Therefore, Lord Krishna says, “May you perform action in the spirit of offering”. Let our actions be other-centered rather than self-centered. Let us function on the basis that we are whole and complete beings.

If I were to ask what you would do if you achieved everything that you wanted in your life, you would reply, “Oh, Swamiji I would be very generous. I would do everything for the sake of the whole world.” Then, I say, start doing that now. Fake it, until you make it: fake, that you are what you want to be; that you do not need anything else in your life; and that you have all the freedom and happiness that you want. Assuming that you feel this way, what would you do? “Oh, I would be very generous, I would be very giving”. Again, I say, start doing just that. You see, letting go is not a dropping off of duty. It is performing the duty in the proper spirit.

The first stage of letting go is not a letting go of the action. It is the letting go of the attachment to the action and the attachment to its result.

A time may come when we can let go of duty as well, when we have gained enough emotional maturity. “But Swamiji, is it not a turning away from the world?” The time has to come when we can turn away from the world; when we have done enough for

the world like Nachiketas in *Kāthopanishad*. The third boon that he asked for was for self-knowledge. He took care of his family with the first boon. With the second boon, he took care of the society. His third boon was for himself. The scriptures recognize this need and give us sanction for it.

A time will come when we can dedicate ourselves to the pursuit of knowledge. A wise person is one who has no agenda of his own. He does not need anything for himself. Therefore, he is very available to the world. When we have gained that freedom by knowledge, we can be very available to the world and be much more effective in contributing to the world than we were before. Therefore at no time should we shirk responsibility.

In fact, learn to perform responsibilities well. This is the way to let go of things. It means growing out of needs by living life with a certain attitude. That is how we can continue to do what we have to do, and make progress.

Question

In our daily life, we are supposed to perform our duty. What is the extent of this duty? Where should we draw the boundaries? Sometimes our boundaries are so vast that we cannot cope with that! What is the sense of proportion?

Answer

It is mandated by the scriptures that one should perform one's *dharma* or duty. The fulfillment of one's duty is the primary means of self-growth, and self-growth is the very purpose of human life. Every tradition has its own prescribed means to achieve this. Vedic tradition considers *dharma* or duty to be the primary means. In the 3rd chapter of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, this *dharma* is explained as arising from the recognition that I am being favored and that I must return the favor. When I recognize what my parents did for me, I feel a sense of gratitude towards them and a desire arises to return the favor. In doing so, I do not expect anything back. I am returning the favor that I have already enjoyed! Thus any action done in the spirit of returning a favor or with a sense of gratitude is called duty. There are many duties: duty towards our parents, duty towards our children, duty towards family members, duty towards society, duty towards the community, duty towards the country and duty towards the whole universe. This is why,

the Vedas prescribe what everybody should do, such mandates as in ‘*Do this*’ or ‘*Don’t do this*’. Depending upon which caste you belonged to and which stage of life you were in, there were duties to be performed. Basically, they said that there were five kinds of duties to be performed everyday. These were duties towards the ancestors, towards the gods, towards the sages, towards other human beings, and towards animals and other creatures.

The idea here is that I perform my duty in the right spirit. If I perceive my duties as being a burden, it does not help me. But if my duty is performed with an understanding that it is a privilege to perform it, it becomes a means for my self-growth. It gradually leads to a *sāttvic* or calm state of mind. It is in such a mind that the desire for knowledge arises. This is when I know that my duties are done! As long as I have *rājasa* or active state of mind and am prey to *rāgā* and *dveṣā* or my likes and dislikes, duties should be performed.

How long should I keep performing duties? Is there a time when to stop? There cannot be a general rule about where to draw the boundaries. It depends upon what the situation calls for and what your capacity to do, is. Different people will have different boundaries. Do what you can as long as it does not hurt you. If the process hurts, it means that you are not doing the duty of taking care of your self. You can only give what you have. If it hurts, it means you do not have that much capacity. Be sincere to yourself while performing your duties

Question

How does a *grhastha* pass through the *grhastha āśrama* and ultimately achieve salvation?

Answer

Grhastha means a householder. According to *Vedic* culture, a *grhastha* is meant to be a *karma yogī*. The scriptures prescribe certain duties for the householder, and he is required to perform these duties. They are called *nitya karma* and *naimittika karma*. *Nitya karma*, are duties to be performed daily and *naimittika karma*, are performed on specific occasions. These duties are primarily of the nature of prayer or worship and are typically of five kinds. They are, the worship of the *ṛṣis*, the worship of the *devatās*, the

worship of the ancestors, the worship of other human beings, and the worship of other creatures. So the life of a householder, is really a life of worship. The *Bhagavad Gītā* teaches that *karma yoga* is the performance of action in the spirit of worship. To the extent that duty and the spirit of worship can be there, *gr̥hastha āśrama* becomes a process of inner purification or renunciation.

Lord Krishna explains that performing action in the spirit of worship is itself, renunciation. In the *Bhagavad Gītā* he says:

*anāśritaḥ karma-phalam kāryam karma karoti yaḥ
sa sannyāsī ca yogī ca na niragnir na c'ākriyaḥ*

The one who performs action (that is) to be done without depending on the result of action, he (or she) is a renunciate and a *karma yogī*, not one who does not perform rituals or (other) action.
[BG 6-1]

The one who performs *kāryam karma*, the right action to perform, without any expectation of *karma-phala* or reward, *anāśritaḥ karma-phalam*, is both a *sannyāsī* as well as a *yogī*, *sannyāsī ca yogī ca*. Because he performs an action without the expectation of a reward, he has renounced the idea of the reward and is therefore a renunciate. When he performs the action, he makes sure that it is the right kind of action and is therefore a *yogī*. So, a *gr̥hastha* is a *sannyāsī* and *yogī*-in-training. Ideally, if this is how *gr̥hastha āśrama* is lived, it leads us to *vanaprastha* and, eventually, to *sannyāsa*. Therefore, living a life of *yoga* in *gr̥hastha āśrama* is a way to ultimately reach *mokṣa*.

Question

Swamiji, you said that one must keep doing *karma*, and in *gr̥hastha āśrama*, one's main *karma* is taking care of the family. You also said that if one does not do *karma*, one would automatically be taken out of the system. If somebody loses his or her job and in spite of trying, cannot find another job to provide for the family, what kind of *karma* do you ask that person to do?

Answer

Not doing *karma* means that you know what is to be done and still do not do it. In the situation that you have described, the person is not able to do *karma*. It is not that he is not doing his *karma*. He is perhaps not doing what he likes to do. But not only is

functioning as an engineer, a *karma*, but trying to find a job is also *karma*. We would not say that the person is a drop out.

If that person does not want to bother about the family, drops out and leaves them to themselves, then perhaps we would say he is not doing his share. But if the person is trying his best, his family should understand that, scale down their needs and do whatever they can, to help in that situation. Fortunately, in the US, you can do something. In India you may not be able to do anything! So, while you may perhaps not be able to do what you were doing earlier, if you scale down your expectations, you may be able to do something. *Karma* is that which we do with the right attitude. So if the person has the right attitude and wants to support his family and with that attitude does what he can do, he is doing his duty.

Question

Are a householder's duties confined just to his family, his immediate near and dear ones, or does his duty extend to other aspects of the creation?

Answer

Theoretically, a person is a member of the whole universe, and therefore has a duty towards the whole universe. But to the extent that we become aware of this, and to the extent that we are able to, our field of concern or responsibility can definitely grow. Ultimately, you become a member of the whole family—*vasudhaiva kutumbakam*—where the whole universe becomes the family. That is the spirit of *karma yoga*, also. That is what offering the action and worship to the Lord means. The Lord means the universe that is in front of me. So, when I perform an action in the spirit of offering or worship, it becomes an offering to the rest of the world.

Duties are a part of ritual. You have duties towards gods, ancestors, sages, all other human beings and all other living beings. Ritual and duty are the same. Duties that are prescribed include rituals as well as interaction with the rest of society. So, to the extent that the spirit of *karma yoga* is imbibed, to that extent it helps me to grow.

It is not a matter of *sannyāsa* or *grhastha*. Whoever develops the emotional maturity, or purity of the heart, grows. The important thing is the inner transformation.

Gṛhasṭha āśrama definitely requires one to grow in maturity, and then alone you can live happily, in harmony. So, *gṛhasṭha āśrama* is an excellent platform for one to grow.

Nothing is tough. *Gṛhasṭha āśrama* is the first stage; *sannyāsa* is the second stage. It is not a different path; they are two stages in one's growth. *Gṛhasṭha āśrama* represents one level of growth, and *sannyāsa* represents a subsequent level of growth. And so, *gṛhasṭha āśrama* leads to *sannyāsa*, and that leads to *mokṣa*. This is the idea.

Destiny versus Free will

We have been given “free will”. We have also been given the faculty of choice. By giving us this body and this personality, by giving us the intelligence with which we can learn, with which we can grow and with which we can make choices, the freedom to fulfill our desires has been given to us.

It is not a great deal of freedom, but it is freedom nevertheless that has been given to the human being. Sometimes people wonder, “Swamiji, are you sure that we have freedom in our lives? Is it not destiny that controls our lives?” This question arises again and again. Is our life controlled by our destiny? Or do we really have the freedom of choice? My answer is “yes” to both these questions. Destiny and free will definitely co-exist!

What is destiny? Destiny is all the things in our lives that we cannot control. In our life every situation involves many things that are not in our control. We have not created them, but they have been given to us whether we like it or not. The whole universe that is in front of us, in fact, follows its own laws! There is nothing we can do about it! If something goes up, it has to come down whether we like it or not. This is the law and we cannot change it. We cannot control it. We find that many such laws, that we did not create and over which we have no control, in fact, govern our lives. This is destiny. Yes, we come across destiny every moment in our life. At the same time, there is also free will, meaning that I definitely have certain choices.

I like to give the example of driving and traffic patterns in India to explain destiny versus free will. You are supposed to drive on the left side of the streets in India and there are rules about right of way, etc. Still, a vehicle can suddenly come on from a side road, even though you have the right of way! You do not know what will happen the next moment on a road in India. In spite of all these unpredictable conditions, I do have a certain freedom to really navigate my vehicle through all that chaotic traffic. I do have a vehicle with a steering wheel, with an accelerator and with a brake pad, with which I can deal with the traffic. People do reach their destinations! When people come from abroad, they just wonder how these things go on, and start believing in God!! If this kind of chaotic driving existed in the United States, there would be thousands of accidents! But this is not the case in India. People seem to develop the instinct to negotiate Indian

roads. It is true that they create the crisis, but having created the crisis, they do know how to manage themselves in that crisis. If you can drive in the city streets of India, you will become a *yogi*. Who is a *yogi*? A *yogi* is a person who is always alert, one who does not take anything for granted.

Suppose I play tennis with another fellow. I have the freedom to hit my ball. He also has the freedom to hit the ball wherever he wants. I wish very much that he should hit the ball back where I am standing so that I can return it. But that doesn't always happen. Usually, when I am at one end of the court, the ball will come to the other end of the court! The fact that we do not know where the ball will come is destiny. However, I have the freedom to run towards the ball for a return.

So understand that there is something called free will in our life. If this free will were not there, no progress would have been possible. The history of human beings shows a tremendous amount of progress. Look at the other creatures, for instance. Sparrows pick up some dry grass here and there, and then seem to make the same kind of nest in the United States, as in India. I have been watching them for a number of years and they do not seem to have improved on their design at all. They make the same kind of nest all the time! Cows eat grass for years together. If I were a cow, I would definitely cook grass or add some spices to make it little more palatable! Why does it never occur to the cow? This is why we infer that they do not seem to have any free will and appear to be totally guided by their instincts, and therefore, there is no progress in the life of any creatures other than that of human beings.

Look at human beings. What progress! What kind of homes they built 5000 years ago, and what kind of homes are they building now and what kind of homes will our children build 25 years from now!! There is tremendous progress in everything. This is a privilege. Therefore free will exists, while there is no doubt that destiny, also exists. We do have a limited freedom, adequate to help navigate our vehicle in the face of unpredictable traffic or chaos. To steer the vehicle that is our life, the faculty of choice is given to us. This is the intelligence, because of which, one has the capacity to learn, to grow, and to make choices. This is where intelligent living comes in.

What is intelligent living? Intelligent living is the making of right choices. If making choice is our privilege, making the right choices is intelligent living. As Swami Dayanandaji would say “we have no choice in making choice”.

Question

Please explain *prārabdha* and *puruṣārtha*.

Answer

Prārabdha and *puruṣārtha* are there in every situation. *Prārabdha* is the situation I confront, that I have not created, and *puruṣārtha* is the way I choose to respond to it. Therefore, *prārabdha* and *puruṣārtha* are essentially present in every situation.

We do not say that there is only destiny. If there were only destiny, nothing would need to be done and there would be no role for free will or individual effort. Every creature, other than the human being, is governed by destiny. There is nothing wrong in a cat eating a mouse for dinner. There is no right or wrong there. But since the human being has free will, he is capable of doing something wrong and this is where *dharma* and *adharma* come into play. Otherwise there is no *adharma*. You can conduct yourself in such a manner that you go on abusing free will. Ultimately you will lose it! It is possible that by the misuse of free will or by not using free will, we might deprive ourselves of the benefit of having free will. This can happen.

Question

Does self-effort or *puruṣārtha* affect our destiny?

Answer

Yes. You can influence your destiny. If there are some undesirable effects in your destiny, you can perform specific actions to try to neutralize them. The outcome, however, will depend upon what it is that you are working against. If the destiny is very strong, it may be difficult to change it, but you can perhaps reduce the impact of it. If the destiny is mild, you can change it somewhat. If the destiny is weak, perhaps you can totally change it. So depending upon the strength of one’s destiny, it is possible to bring about some change through *puruṣārtha* or self-effort.

Question

If the creator and the creation are the same, and human beings are part of the creation, why should there be diversity in God's creation?

Answer

God's creation keeps your *karma* in mind. It is not arbitrary. When something is created, the law of cause and effect is kept in mind. Everybody has his or her own history of cause and effect, and therefore, what I am in the present is the consequence of what I have done in the past. This is why there is diversity amongst God's creations.

Question

I have a little problem with respect to free will. The *karma* theory holds that everything received by us is an effect of a preceding cause, and that there is a cause for everything. The manifestation of everything is, therefore, due to its preceding cause. Free will, on the other hand, has no preceding cause. Please comment.

Answer

Everything is not cause and effect. Nature has no cause. Heat is the nature of fire. Brightness is the nature of the sun. Why is fire hot? Or why is the sun bright? There can be no question about their nature. Similarly, it is your nature that you have a free will. We need not look for a cause for the nature of things.

Everything that is inherent in nature does not have a cause because if there were a cause, this inherent quality is likely to go away when the cause goes away. That would imply that it is not its true nature. It is just like saying that fire, in principle, will be cold when its cause is gone!

Question

Suppose my destiny ordains that my death take place by murder, someone would be instrumental in bringing it about. Would this be a conscious act? He is an instrument in fulfilling my ordained destiny. In this act, how much free will can the murderer exercise? How much of this act is ordained by destiny?

Answer

Everything that happens is because of both, destiny and free will. There is no such thing as pure destiny or pure will. Even in the natural death of a person, there is some free will involved.

Question

But what can be said about the murderer?

Answer

The murderer uses his free will.

Question

But that is also preordained because he is at the right place at the right time to bring about this predestined event!

Answer

Free will is involved there also. It is either the dead person's free will, or the murderer's free will, or someone else's free will. In every event, there is a combination of destiny as well as individual free will. Even when a natural death happens, I would say, a little bit of free will is involved.

Question

This morning you explained *annamaya-kośa*. You talked about this body not being the self because the body came into being at a certain time, and the self did not come into being at any time. Please comment.

Answer

This body cannot be the self, because the self must have continued existence. The present is the product of the past. This body is the present. If the body were the self, this body should have been present in the past to create the present. The present creates the future, and therefore, the body must also be present in the future to experience the effect of the present. But then, the body *was not* in the past to create the effects called the present, and the body *will not be* in the future to experience the effects created by the present. That alone, which *was* in the past, and *will be* in the future, can be the self. Therefore this body cannot be the self.

Only if the self is in the past, the present and the future, will there be fairness in the law of *karma*, which deems that whoever performs an action is accountable for its result. Right now, I am experiencing in the present, the results of my past. If I was not in the past, it implies that these results have come to me without my deserving them or without my asking for them. If I am not in the future, whatever I do today will go without fructifying. This is not right. It implies that I am stuck with something that I have not done, and also that I am being deprived of the results of what I have done so far. This does not sound fair. For there to be fairness, I must be the one who is responsible. So I must be in the past, and I must continue to be in the future also. So, the body is not in the past and not in the future, whereas the self is.

Another basis, on which we can say that you are not your body, is that you are the observer of your body.

Question

There seems to be a strong deterministic school of thought in Hindu society that says whatever has to happen will happen. Please comment.

Answer

Some astrologers believe in human destiny to a very large extent. But they do ask you to perform certain specific prayers or conduct certain rituals to counteract the effects of the planets. So *puruṣārtha* or self-effort has always been accepted in the Hindu society. There cannot be total determinism, or self-effort would have no role at all. There is no school of thought that talks of total determinism.

We accept that the two aspects of *puruṣārtha* and *prārabdha* or self-effort and destiny are present in every situation. There is something that I can control, and there are many things that I do not control. That which I cannot control is called *prārabdha*. I apply my free will on that which I can control. Sometimes, I may not have a whole lot of freedom, and sometimes, I may not even have the freedom to decide what to do. Even that may be determined for me. But I have freedom in my attitude towards what I do. So what is given to me is *prārabdha* and what I do with it can be called the free will.

What is *prārabdha* today was free will in the past. Thus we can say that there is nothing but free will. Or we could say that even that very free will was a result of

prārabdha. So we can say just as well, that there is nothing but *prārabdha*! Both are ultimately the same because *prārabdha*, is that which given by God and free will is that which the individual exercises. Therefore, *prārabdha* and *puruṣārtha* merge into one. Until we know that non-duality, both *prārabdha* and *puruṣārtha* are there in every situation.

Question

When we perform an action, how do we know that it was not completely determined by *prārabdha*? There have been situations where our very nature would dictate what we do. We do not have any free choice. Please comment.

Answer

Whenever you are about to do something, you generally know what is right and what is wrong. There is a basic instinct given to human beings, that I should not do unto others what I do not want done unto me. I have certain expectations from others as to how I should be treated and I know that other human beings also like to be treated in the same way. We all have this awareness of values. Therefore, when I perform an action in accordance with these values, I am doing it right. In this, I use my free will. When I overlook the values, I am not exercising my free will.

Question

So are there any such basic universal principles?

Answer

Yes, there are certain basic universal principles. We call them values. Non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, and compassion are some of these values. The *Bhagavad Gītā* talks about these values in many places. Describing a wise person it says, *adveṣṭā sarva-bhūtānām*, that he is one who does not hate anybody [BG 12-13]. He is *maitraḥ*, one who is friendly to everybody and *karuṇaḥ*, one who has compassion for all. These are universal values because everybody loves these values. Acting in accordance with these universal values would be called using my free will. Allowing me to be controlled by my passions, my anger or my greed would be following my destiny.

Question

What do you say about the beliefs of *punya* and *pāpa*? Is it based on logic and reason? Or is it just a belief system and a model to pacify the human mind for the lack of answers with regard to the apparently irrational harsh realities of life?

Answer

Punya and *pāpa* is not a belief system. It is logical. There definitely is law and order because had there been no law, there would have been no right or wrong. This order establishes a reference point and it is only with respect to this reference point that right and wrong can be there. In its absence there can be no right or wrong. In our situation here, the reference point is the intrinsic knowledge that there is, in all of us. Each one of us wants to be treated in a certain way by the world and each one of us knows how the world wants to be treated by us. Therefore, there is a universal law. When this law is violated, the act of violation is called *pāpa*. When this law is honored, the action which conforms to the law is called *punya*. *Punya* gives rise to positive effects. This universal law or order is known to each and every one of us. Therefore, *punya* and *pāpa* cannot be called a belief; they are an aspect of this law and order.

Question

There is an argument that free will is actually conditioned by *prārabdha* and by our own *saṃskāras*. Therefore isn't there total determinism?

Answer

Even though my free will may be conditioned, and even though my past *saṃskāras* or my upbringing, my impressions or disposition may propel me to function in a certain way, there still is within me, a discernment of what is right and what is wrong. Just as I want to live and live happily, others also want to live and live happily. Just as I do not want to be hurt by them, they also do not want to be hurt by me. Everybody is born with this basic insight and I can always pay attention to that voice within me, and have a choice to function according to that. Secondly, we can always take recourse to *Dharma Śāstra*. The scriptures have taught us what is right and what is not. Thus, even

though my own *samskāras* may be conditioned by the past, I always have the freedom to go against the dictates of my *samskāras* in following the wisdom of the scriptures.

Question

Suppose someone hits my car and I get hurt. Is it due to my past *karmas* or is it just an accident and nothing to do with my past *karmas*?

Answer

We say that it is due to past *karma*. This idea of past *karma* helps us to deal with the situation. It makes it easier to accept an event that would otherwise give rise to a lot of anger in me. Nobody can tell you why it happened because nobody knows why. In as much as the basic law of cause and effect governs everything, this event also must have a cause. Therefore, when something happens we say that the cause is *karma*. Otherwise there is no answer and we get unnerved by it. People get caught in events that cannot be explained, and sometimes, they do not come out of it for months. We thus ascribe the event to some past *karma*, and this helps us come to terms with it and proceed with our lives.

Acknowledgements

This booklet contains responses to a number of interesting questions answered by Swami Veditatmananda Saraswati during the course of the New Jersey Public Talks, as well as at satsangs held at homes and in the Family Camps of the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam. These have been appearing regularly in the form of weekly emails to interested seekers in the tri-state area. Our heartfelt thanks to Madhu Chatrath, June Christopher, Kalyani Dave, Connie DeMartino and Chaya Rajaram for help with the transcription and editing that have made these weekly emails possible. We thank Bindu Bhat, Sita Nair, Suresh Nair and Latha Narayanan for reviewing this booklet and making very helpful suggestions.

Swamiji answers these questions, however diverse or repetitive, with great patience and deliberation, and provides clarification in his characteristic style of undemanding simplicity. His responses illustrate how discerning he is, of the workings of the modern mind, as he guides us with compassion through the process of reconciling the ancient wisdom of our scriptures, with the realities of modern life. This booklet is a compilation of all the weekly emails in an effort to synthesize them so that all seekers can benefit from Swamiji's pragmatic answers.

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Jayshree Ramakrishnan

Krishnakumar (KK) S. Davey

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