

# The concept of yajña in the Bhagavad Gītā<sup>1</sup>

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## The concept of yajña

The Bhagavad Gītā prescribes a life of yajña for the removal of śoka and moha and the consequent discovery of one's true happy self. Traditionally, a Vedic fire ritual offered to propitiate various devatās for gaining certain desired results is termed a yajña. It was a cooperative effort that needed the help of the whole community. One person offers the bricks needed for the yajñaśālā, a mason constructs it, etc. Also, in this ritual what is offered is very important. In this sense, yajña is defined as देवतोद्देशेन द्रव्यत्यागः. Here, offering is the important aspect. In the Bhagavad Gītā Lord Kṛṣṇa employs the word yajña in a much broader sense to teach us some important principles. In Gītā, importance is given to the spirit of offering. The word yajña is used for the very first time in Gītā in

*verse 9 of chapter 3.*

यज्ञार्थात्कर्मणोऽन्यत्र लोकोऽयं कर्मबन्धनः ।

तदर्थं कर्म कौन्तेय मुक्तसङ्गः समाचरः ॥

yajñārthātkarmaṇo'nyatra loko'yaṃ karmabandhanaḥ |

tadārthaṃ karma kaunteya muktasaṅgaḥ samācara || Gītā 3.9

Ādi Śāṅkarācārya in his commentary on this verse quotes a reference from the śruti for the word yajña which defines it as Lord Viṣṇu, यज्ञो वै विष्णुः (yajño vai Viṣṇuḥ). Lord Kṛṣṇa states that an action performed with an attitude of offering to Īśvara is yajña.

Note that the action is not mentioned. Only the attitude with which it should be performed is prescribed. We find ourselves doing many roles. And different situations demand how we should play these roles. Lord Kṛṣṇa recommends that we do the actions with a sense of offering, that is, yajna. Then, one may ask, how about computer work, daily chores, etc. Should they also be done with a sense of offering to Īśvara? “Yes,” says Lord Kṛṣṇa.

## Who is Īśvara?

In fact, Īśvara and how He should be propitiated are well defined in Bhagavad Gītā in 18.46:

यतः प्रवृत्तिर्भूतानां येन सर्वमिदं ततम् ।

स्वकर्मणा तमभ्यर्च्य सिद्धिं विन्दति मानवः ॥

yataḥ pravṛttirbhūtānāṃ yena sarvamidaṃ tatam |

svakarmanā tamabhyarcya siddhiṃ vindati mānavaḥ ||

(Through one's duty, worshiping Him from whom is the creation of the beings, by whom all this is pervaded, a human being gains success.).

We need to understand that all activities like shining of the sun, flow of the water movement of the air, etc. are all impelled by Īśvara. In fact, whoever/whatever is in front of you is the Īśvara. Whomever you interact with is नारायणः(Nārāyaṇaḥ), वासुदेवः (Vāsudevaḥ). Vāsudevaḥ is derived from the meaning of the root वस् “to dwell,” the one who dwells in all the hearts. Cultivate the virtue of kindness to break the cycle of resentment and sadness. If Īśvara is in the hearts of all, would that mean that one’s difficult boss, annoying neighbor, etc. are also Vāsudeva? Does one interact with them with a sense of offering? Yes. One may protest that it is very difficult to show kindness to them. One may even ask, “Will I not become the “doormat” for everyone by being kind to everyone?” No. Wishing well for all is kindness. How to do it? One has to cultivate it. One has to subdue the impulse of anger. It is important to know that when one reacts with anger, one starts a cycle of misery and resentment. We all know the popular story of the cycle of resentment between King Drupada and Ācārya Drona and its consequences from Mahābhārata. In the story, the resentment cycle was finally broken by Draupadi when she pardoned Aśvatthāmā, the son of Drona.

### Soft Skill

Yajna is the attitude of offering oneself to the wellbeing of others. Its expression is kindness, wishing everyone well. It is not a sign of weakness. Usually, rāga and dveṣa, likes and dislikes, determine our interaction with others. They are expressed as partiality, cruelty, etc. If we continue in this manner, then anger, greed, etc. will continue to grow. The more one resents, the more it grows and ultimately leads to one’s unhappiness. The cause of one’s unhappiness is one’s own resentful, regretful mind. Such a mind is the bondage(मन एव मनुष्यानां बन्धमोक्षयोः कारणम् ) Every situation or interaction is an opportunity to be a sādḥaka (striver). External factors do the job of just pushing the “buttons” on us and we react. The only way to be happy is to subdue the tendencies of resentment, anger, greed etc. and cultivate the opposite tendencies. Initially, one has to cultivate them deliberately. If one fails to do so, the resentment cycle continues. We should remind ourselves to be kind and not hurting others. It should become our habit. Evil thoughts may occur, but one deliberately cultivates the opposite tendencies. Every moment or situation is an opportunity to bring out the kindness. That is happiness, born of one’s inherent goodness, kindness and not born of an outside source. Happiness born of the attitude of offering is not binding. Lord Kṛṣṇa says that happiness comes from the pleased mind is sātḥvik and is everlasting. This is yajña, an offering of oneself.

Offering one’s goodness, kindness is karma yoga. This attitude of contributing to other people's happiness by being a kind, generous person is karma yoga. One need not try to win an argument. Trying to win an argument is binding. One’s rāga and dveṣa drive oneself to win the argument and not to lose. May one subdue them by letting the other win the argument. This attitude of kindness is worship of Īśvara. So, every interaction is an opportunity for us to invoke this attitude and hence, Īśvara. Lord Kṛṣṇa invokes this spiritual law of happiness in verse 3.9 तदर्थं कर्म कौन्तेय - perform action for the sake of yajna. It is a soft skill that we should develop. With the attitude of offering, that is, yajña, any occasion can be converted to a situation of happiness. We can start with the easy cases first and take up the difficult ones as we make progress.

to be continued....

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<sup>1</sup> This article is excerpted from the talks on the subject given by Swami Viditatmananda Saraswati in New Jersey, July 6-8, 2017. It is prepared by Mani Natarajan, Piscataway, New Jersey.