

Karma Yoga Rahasyam

Continued from January 2019 issue. Article by Dr.V. Swaminathan

Karma yoga is meant for self-knowledge

Thus, Lord Kṛṣṇa commands Arjuna, “*buddhau śaraṇamanviccha*, hey Arjuna, may you take refuge in buddhi; may you take shelter in the knowledge, may you take shelter in the right attitude.” This is a vidhi vākya, a command is given. Whenever a command is given, then the reward also must be given. This is the Vedic style. The reward is mentioned in the 50th verse¹. *buddhi yukta* means one who is endowed with the buddhi. Bhāṣyakāra Śāṅkara gives two explanations for the word buddhi – i) self knowledge, that is, when the action is performed as a means for self-knowledge and ii) the right attitude. The attitude is one of equanimity, *samatva buddhi*, or offering to Īśvara, *Īśvarārpana buddhi*, with the spirit of a contributor. The Vedas point out that being a recipient of so many favors from the world, there must be a sense of gratitude such that one’s actions become a means of returning that favor. *Devatās*(the gods), *ṛiṣis*(the seers), *pitṛs*(the manes), one’s parents, teachers and other human beings, all of them contribute to one’s living. In the Vedic parlance, duty is an action performed with the attitude of returning the favor. Dharma, or *svadharma*, is one’s duty, meaning the right action to perform with a sense of gratitude. In every situation, there is a choice of doing what is right and what is convenient. Dharma means doing in accordance with what is right and with right values. One can be performing actions which are right but they can be for one’s personal benefit. The same right action can also be performed for the benefit of the world with the attitude of being a contributor. One can view an action as an occasion to maintain the attitude of offering. The action itself is only incidental. It is the attitude which ultimately brings about self-knowledge. Yoga is this attitude, i) the attitude of equanimity, ii) the attitude of offering to Īśvara, that is, with the spirit of being a contributor. In karma yoga both the attitudes are involved. The former is the attitude with reference to the outcome and the latter is the attitude with respect to the action.

The result of performing an action as yoga in the sense described above is described in verse 2.50.¹ *jahātīha ubhe sukṛtaduṣkṛte* – here in this world while living the person gives up (*jahāti*), meaning, he becomes free from both *puṇya* and *pāpa*, virtue and vice (*ubhe sukṛtaduṣkṛte*) which are equally the sources of bondage. One surely wants to become free from *pāpa* which gives unpleasant experiences. Does one want to be free from *puṇya* which gives pleasure? The answer is yes, as *puṇya* also is a source of bondage as one is dependent upon something else for one’s happiness.

¹ बुद्धियुक्तो जहातीह उभे सुकृतदुष्कृते । buddhiyukto jahātīha ubhe sukṛtaduṣkṛte ।

तस्माद् योगाय युज्यस्व योगः कर्मसु कौशलम् ॥ tasmād yogāya yujyasva yogaḥ karmasu kauśalam ॥ verse 2.50

Lord Kṛṣṇa says that by the attitude of yoga, one rejects both puṇya and pāpa. When one performs a virtuous action, puṇya will be created whether one wants it or not. Here it should be noted that there are two kinds of puṇya. One kind will be utilized in creating the pleasurable situation and will be exhausted upon experience. On the other hand, when one performs the action without even asking for that puṇya, then also the action creates puṇya which will neutralize the pāpa. The pāpa of the past karma produces rāga and dveṣa in the present and when it is neutralized, antaḥkaraṇa suddhi can come. The antaḥkaraṇa suddhi creates a sātvik mind which generates in one the desire for knowledge. Gaining knowledge becomes a predominant goal in one's life and other things become less and less important. The mind does not need any distraction in terms of pleasure seeking as it has discovered the self-sufficiency and acquiring self-knowledge progressively becomes the primary agenda. This is accomplished by karma yoga. When knowledge becomes the only agenda, then one gives up all karma, including one's duties, goes to a teacher and listens to the scriptures. Knowledge takes place and one recognizes that one is akarta, that is, one's nature is actionlessness. Thus karma yoga is meant for one to become free from karma. It brings about the purification of mind which in turn brings about the desire for knowledge, that leads to the pursuit of knowledge, that gives rise to knowledge, and that brings about mokṣa. This whole process is like getting on to the escalator - one has to only step in and things take place automatically. It is all part of Īśvara's scheme. When we are ready then the next step comes for us. Therefore, Lord Kṛṣṇa says, "*tasmād yogāya yujyasva* – Arjuna! may you undertake, may you be devoted to performing karma with the attitude of yoga." Then the ultimate goal of life is served.

yogaḥ karmasu kauśalam – this is the second definition of yoga. Kauśalam is kuśala bhāva. Pūjya Swāmiji's translation of the word kauśalam is discretion. Kauśalam means actually the state of well-being. The greatest kauśalam, well-being, is mokṣa which is total freedom or total happiness. Kauśalam is also skill in action. It is a kind of spiritual skill as karma can become the means of mokṣa. Lord Kṛṣṇa says that the real skill is that karma whose nature is to bind is converted as the means to free one from karma when performed with the attitude of yoga. Kuśalatā is not in karma. It is in yoga or in the right attitude.

Self knowledge is the priority in life

It should be remembered that the teaching of Bhagavad Gītā is Lord Kṛṣṇa's response to Arjuna who asked for niśreyas, that is, mokṣa, absolute freedom. The absolute freedom is gained only by the knowledge that one is never bound, which is a fact. If this is not clear, then when one studies Vedānta, there is apprehension of Gītā's message caused by one's concerns such as one's job, income, prestige, others' opinions and so forth. These things will require one's attention as far as vyavahāra (transaction in the empirical world) is concerned and one has to attend to them in a practical manner. But one must recognize that, even after achieving all the worldly goals, one is not free from sorrow. Discerning the fact that the empirical worldly gains do not give long lasting happiness and that absolute peace or absolute happiness is obtained only by the knowledge of Self, gaining Self knowledge should have a higher priority than the mundane in one's life. Once this clarity about what one is really seeking is gained, then everything falls in place and achieving the attitude of samatva buddhi becomes meaningful.

Another ramification of the attitude of yoga or equanimity of the mind is to receive the outcome of an action as a prasāda, that which comes from Īśvara. One performs the action but Īśvara as the karma phala dātā determines the outcome. When Īśvara is looked upon as one's well-wisher, then whatever given by Him is deemed as part of His agenda for one to grow. Thus the prasāda buddhi is meant for one's prasannatā, cheerfulness of the mind. One receives the prasāda with a sense of gratitude, with a sense of being blessed. If one has total trust in Īśvara as the benevolent karma phala dātā, not just a mere dispenser of the result of action but is one's well-wisher, then even 'failure' is looked upon as a bitter medicine meant for one's benefit alone. With such a trust, one can maintain equanimity.

A discovery that behind one's all desires there is the desire for mokṣa, unconditional freedom, makes the objective of life clear. Unconditional happiness is what one is seeking ultimately. All the worldly thing that one is seeking is not for their sake but only for the sake of the self alone. What one is seeking is the pleased self and other things are simply the means for that. The yoga of samatvam, prasāda buddhi, relatively creates the pleased self and that leads to the ultimate goal called mokṣa. Lord Kṛṣṇa's reiterates in verse 51² whatever that has been said so far: the wise (*manīṣiṇaḥ*) endowed with the attitude of karma yoga (*buddhiyuktā*), having given up the results of action (*karmajaṃ phalaṃ tyaktvā*), free from the bondage of birth (*janmabandhavinirmuktāḥ*), indeed accomplish the end that is free from all afflictions (*hi padaṃ gacchantyanāmayam*).

A bhakta or a karma yogi performs an action with the attitude of offering to Īśvara, for pleasing Īśvara. He reckons that the Lord is the karma phala dātā and hence is willing to let the Lord decide the result of the action. He does not have the concern of what will happen to him. As long as that concern is there, it will not really be yoga buddhi. Usually we are seeking a reward for everything we do including even an act of worship such as a pūjā. There is nothing wrong in such an act, in the sense that, instead of pleasing the whole world one is pleasing the Lord and that instead of seeking the reward from worldly people one is seeking the reward from Īśvara. However, it does not constitute either karma yoga or bhakti yoga. No doubt, the Lord recognizes the person who is praying to Him seeking a reward as an arthārthī bhakta³. But then the Lord hopes that ultimately he will become a jijñāsu bhakta who will perform actions without seeking any reward. A karma yogi is clever in that he lets the Lord decide what is right for him. If one decides what is right for oneself and accordingly asks for an outcome, it may or may not be the right one. One needs to recognize that what one is in the present is the result of what one asked for in the past. The present does not necessarily connote a happy status. If so, then what is the point in continuing to rely on one's decision of what is right for oneself. Perhaps, it is time to let Īśvara decide what is right for oneself.

² कर्मजं बुद्धियुक्ता हि फलं त्यक्त्वा मनीषिणः । karmajaṃ buddhiyuktā hi phalaṃ tyaktvā manīṣiṇaḥ ।

जन्मबन्धविनिर्मुक्ताः पदं गच्छन्त्यनामयम् ॥ janmabandhavinirmuktāḥ padaṃ gacchantyanāmayam ॥

³ Bhagavad Gītā, Chapter 7, v.16.

A story is told in the kauṣītakibrāhmaṇopaniṣat of a dialog between Pratardana, king of Benares, and Indra. Once, there was the battle between devas and asuras and king Pratardana fought on the side of the devas and was instrumental in defeating the asuras. Indra, the king of the devas, was pleased with Pratardana and offered him a boon of his choice. Pratardana was very clever. He entrusted the responsibility of choosing what is good for him to Indra. Indra knew that the most beneficial thing for Pratardana was brahma vidya or self-knowledge alone and hence had no choice but to impart that to Pratardana. The point here is that the Lord who is omniscient and benevolent knows what is right for one and therefore one should let Him decide the reward. This is the attitude of a karma yogi who performs actions as an offering to Īśvara. Just as we do a pūjā as an offering to the Lord, slowly we let the attitude of a pūjā percolate in our life. We can start with one or two actions performed every day as an offering to the Lord with the attitude of a contributor and not as a consumer. Let there be a few actions every day that are done without any calculation of how they can give a personal reward. The normal business of doing things with the attitude of ‘what is in it for me,’ will only satisfy and nurture the self-centered ego, which is like a fire - the more one tries to satisfy it, the more demanding it becomes. It can never be satisfied. Therefore, this self-centeredness, the gratification of ego is a never a winning game. When an action is done with the attitude of a contributor, the objective is not self-gratification, but is the gratification of Īśvara. The attitude of yoga is simply the attitude of being a contributor. The person performs the action purely out of kindness and compassion as an offering to benefit someone and not exploiting a situation to gain a personal reward. Because kindness and compassion by themselves give fulfillment one does not need any further reward.

What happens to the person who is endowed with this attitude? Lord Kṛṣṇa says in the 9th chapter, “*teṣāṃ yogakṣemaṃ vahāmyaham* - I take care of their yoga (giving them what they need) and kṣema (protecting what they have.” Īśvara provides them with what they need and not give them what they want. The attitude of performing an action as a contributor, as an act of worship of Īśvara, completely transforms the self-centered person into an other-centered person. He/she becomes a maṇiṣiṇaḥ, a wise person. The attitude gives the wisdom of ātmā, the Self, because ātmā is an absolute contributor. Īśvara is an absolute contributor because He is whole and complete and therefore, there is no lack or need. Ātmā is essentially nondifferent from Īśvara. So, one can begin as a relative contributor to recognize finally that the Self is essentially nondifferent from Īśvara, the absolute contributor. During the process, the self-centeredness becomes weaker and weaker, the raga/dveṣas in the mind become less and less and the mind becomes more and more pure. In such a mind arises the desire for knowledge called vividiṣā. The next step is to go to the teacher, listen to the scriptures and gain the knowledge. There is a confidence revealed through this verse that when one undertakes the first step in performing an action with the right attitude, other steps will follow. The self knowledge frees one from the bondage of birth once and for all (vinirmuktāḥ) and indeed one accomplishes the end that is free from all afflictions. When there is abundance in knowledge, ignorance does not come back. Bondage doesn't come back because there is no such thing as bondage, really speaking. Bondage is nothing but a notion that goes away. The wholeness or completeness or absolute happiness is nothing but one's nature only.

Kauṣītakibrāhmaṇopaniṣat, 3rd Chapter.
Bhagavad Gītā, Chapter 9, v.22.

The wrong attitude deprives oneself of one's true nature and with the right attitude, one starts deriving the benefit of one's own self. It is not that some day this person will become liberated. He keeps on discovering freedom in every step which culminates into the total freedom. Lord Kṛṣṇa's teaching here generates a certain confidence in the veracity of the message. Living the life of a contributor one discovers a self satisfaction, self worth, and self-respect. One does not get self esteem by being a consumer and accumulating stuff. One gains self esteem by becoming a giver. The creates the, śraddhā, trust, that one is on the right path towards achieving the goal of life.

Discovering freedom, mokṣa, is described in a traditional manner in this verse as freedom from the bondage called birth (*janmabandhavinirmuktāḥ*). Birth itself is bondage because it is duḥkhālayam. Birth means acquiring a body-mind-sense complex and a consequent identification with it. The limitations of the body-mind-sense complex become one's limitations and they are the repository of all kinds of pain and sorrow. Vedānta explains that mokṣa means freedom from cycle of birth and death or freedom from unhappiness and sorrow once for all.

All pain and sorrow are experienced at three levels – ādhyātmika (centered on oneself), ādhibhautika (centered on the environment) and ādhidaivika (centered on natural forces). So to speak, one is under attack from three sides. At the adhyātmika level, there are afflictions due to body, mind etc. There are all kinds of body-aches. One day it is backache and another day it is stomach ache. The mind is also troubling all the time. It does not cooperate. It becomes sad, angry, greedy, and jealous. Sometimes one's biggest enemy is one's own mind itself. The world will always pour salt on the wound and will keep on pushing the buttons. At the ādhibhautika level one works very hard to arrange the world around oneself so that it is favorable. Then, at the ādhidaivika level, all the devatās, planets, and stars create all kinds of unforeseen situations in life. Freedom from sorrow amounts to freedom from the three afflictions and attainment of happiness. Both of them are simultaneous. One attains the destination (*padam*) which is free from all diseases (*anāmayam*), the three fold afflictions. Of course, being free from ādhyātmika affliction, for example, does not mean that one will not fall sick. The body will behave the way it does. Being free from sorrow is different from being free from pain. Pain is a reality of life. The destiny or karma will bring pain. The world also behaves in certain way causing pain. However, sorrow is one's own creation. Sorrow is the reaction of the mind to a given situation when one rejects it.

Freedom from sorrow is freedom from reaction. A wise person maintains equanimity in all dyadic situations such as success and failure, praise and censure, honor and dishonor, comfort and discomfort and so on and hence is free from sorrow. This freedom from sorrow is mokṣa otherwise characterized as ātyantika duḥkha nivṛtti, freedom from sorrow once and for all and niratiśaya sukha avāpti, attainment of all the happiness once and for all. But this is one's nature and hence there is no attaining but simply owning up. All this started with performing action with the attitude of yoga buddhi while receiving the result of the action with the prasāda buddhi. This is like stepping onto an escalator. Some move fast and some move slow. It does not matter. One reaches the final destination.

Living the life with the attitude of performing action as an offering to the Lord, Īśvarārpaṇa buddhi, is a prayerful life. As Pūjya Swāmi Dayānanda says a prayerful mind is one that is always conscious of Īśvara. While performing the day-to-day activities, one remembers Īśvara as the karma adhyakṣa, the witness of all the actions by whose grace any action becomes possible. The individual has the three-fold power - icchā śakti, the power to will, kriyā śakti, the power to act, and jñāna śakti, the power to know. In the recognition that all these powers are given by Īśvara, one appreciates the grace of Īśvara that is constantly flowing in one's life. This brings about also a sense of gratitude in one's mind and the tendency to extract benefit from one's action will also go away. In this manner, a karma yogi becomes an instrument in the hand of the Lord doing the best that one can, and in doing the right thing. Thus, the teaching of karma yoga brings about a total transformation in that one recognizes that as a human being, performing an action that is called for in a given situation with the right attitude and values, is a privilege. This is how the concept of duty arises and as a duty there is nothing inferior or superior. A karma yogi is a bhakta, remaining as an instrument in the hand of the Lord while performing the action and accepting the outcome of the action as Īśvara prasāda. Karma serves as a process of worshipping Īśvara. This process renders the mind sātvik wherein arises jijñāsā, the desire to know. To fulfill that desire, one then goes to the guru, sit at his feet, serve him, learn from him and gain the knowledge. Thus, one becomes wise and attains the goal of life.

Measuring the progress in a life of karma yoga

Verse 2.52 tells how one can measure the progress one makes in the process. The delusion or aviveka is seeing something which is not there and failing to see something which is there. In the rope-snake example, the delusion is seeing the snake which is not there and not seeing the rope which is there. One is born with ignorance of the true nature of oneself. The true nature of oneself is limitlessness, wholeness, completeness, and happiness. The delusion born of ignorance is taking oneself to be a limited being, unhappy, limited, bound, and helpless. These notions or conclusions that one entertains about oneself are the result of the delusion. The self-judgment, self-opinion of oneself, is entirely contrary to the reality. The identification with the body, mind, and sense complex creates all kinds of sense of smallness, limitedness, helplessness, and sorrow. This is called moha kalilam, turbidity, in the form of various complexes or notions of oneself. One feels a sense of insecurity and always feels the need to defend and protect oneself from the whole world. In the words of Pūjya Swāmi Dayānanda, there is a ninja in everyone, ready to fight. The need to feel comfortable and safe makes one seek comfort in many things, situations, and people. One becomes dependent on them. Then, born are attachments or aversions to things which provide comfort or discomfort. One's life is spent in managing the attachments and aversions and there is a continuous struggle.

यदा ते मोहकलिलं बुद्धिर्व्यतितरिष्यति । yadā te mohakalilaṃ buddhirvyatitarīṣyati ।

तदा गन्तासि निर्वेदं श्रोतव्यस्य श्रुतस्य च ॥ tadā gantāsi nirvedaṃ śrotavyasya śrutasya ca ॥ verse 2.52 (When your intellect crosses over the impurity of delusion, then you shall gain a dispassion towards what has been heard and what is yet to be heard.)

Lord Kṛṣṇa provides the solution of reversing this whole thing. Ignorance is the source of the problem and knowledge is the solution. Being born with self-ignorance makes one live the life of aviveka, non-discrimination, meaning that one gives importance to things that are not important and overlooks those things that are important. Self-knowledge, being opposed to self-ignorance, gives viveka, discrimination. One recognizes that karma or karma phala is not important but the attitude with which the karma is performed or karma phala is received is important. One looks upon karma as a God given opportunity to make a contribution. This attitude converts the action into yoga. One begins to deliberately adopt the values and attitudes that are opposed to ignorance which created attachments and aversions, a sense of inferiority, a sense of smallness, and a sense of self dissatisfaction. By adopting a cross process, one discovers self-satisfaction. An important thing to note here is that satisfaction doesn't come as the result of karma phala but from oneself in doing the right thing with the right attitude and with the spirit of contribution.

to be continued...

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