

# Karma Yoga Rahasyam<sup>1</sup>

*continued from previous issue...*

## **Attitude matters**

Transforming the mind is the whole purpose of karma yoga. The self-centered attitude makes the mind unfavorable to one. Therefore, deliberately entertaining the attitude of a contributor or selflessness as best as one can, will transform the mind from being unfavorable to become favorable. In such a mind is revealed that satisfaction is the nature of the Self. This is the message Lord Kṛṣṇa gives in verse 2.49 <sup>6</sup>. Whenever one performs even a small act of kindness, one feels good about oneself. One needs to perform actions which create a sense of self-worth. Since one expects others to be kind towards oneself, when one is kind to others, the sense of feeling good about oneself happens automatically. The reverential attitude towards commonly sensed values when performing an action is referred to as buddhi yoga<sup>6</sup>. Buddhi yoga also encompasses the attitude of pleasing the Lord, the attitude of being a contributor, the attitude of selflessness or the other-centeredness while performing the action. The action performed with the self-centered attitude is far inferior to that performed with the other-centered attitude (*dūreṇa hyavaram karma buddhiyogād*).

The only way that the action will not be self-centered is when one does not give reality to one's sense of lack or want. Instead, one performs the action with the attitude of wholeness. Although the wholeness may not yet be a reality, one deliberately entertains that attitude. One can also garner some insights by analyzing what one is seeking in life. One can easily discern that one is seeking only wholeness or completeness and that it cannot be achieved by limited actions, even if they are countless. In this manner, there is a quantum jump in recognizing the possibility that wholeness is perhaps one's true nature and that what separates one from that wholeness is not space or time but ignorance. This is a very big insight. The whole struggle of achieving and becoming, comes to an end. One's agenda then is focused in removing the ignorance. Buddhi yoga can also mean yoga of knowledge of ātmā being sat-cit-ānanda. This is the ultimate goal of life and one entertains the right attitudes which are conducive to gaining that knowledge. So action performed with this understanding and with the attitude is much superior to self-centered actions.

Why is self-centered action inferior? Śāṅkara says janmamaraṇādihetutvāt<sup>7</sup> - because self-centered action becomes a hetu, a cause, of janma and marana. It only perpetuates the cycle of birth and death. In other words, it perpetuates the sense of inadequacy. The inadequacy makes one do more and more karma, thereby creating more and more karma phala, and therefore, more and more janma. Looking upon oneself as inadequate will only perpetuate ignorance which is the very cause of the inadequacy in the first place.

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<sup>6</sup> दूरेण ह्यवरं कर्म बुद्धियोगाद्धनञ्जय । dūreṇa hyavaram karma buddhiyogāddhanañjaya ।

बुद्धौ शरणमन्विच्छ कृपणाः फलहेतवः ॥ buddhau śaraṇamanviccha kṛpaṇāḥ phalahetavaḥ ॥ 2.49

On the other hand, if one looks upon oneself as an adequate being, then it is conducive to discovering adequacy. First comes the bhāvana, the attitude, and later comes the knowledge. The knowledge that one is the adequate Self will result when one entertains consistently for a length of time, the attitude of adequacy while performing the karma. One takes refuge in this attitude of yoga of offering to the Lord, of being a contributor, which enables one to slowly discover the freedom from fear, from inadequacy, from insecurity. This is like a little child taking refuge in the mother in whose lap the infant feels completely safe. Initially, the attitude gives relative freedom from fear and ultimately leads to knowledge which gives absolute freedom. As pūjya Swāmi Dayānanda says the absolute cannot be attained without the relative. Relative happiness, which is the tranquility of the mind, becomes a means of gaining absolute happiness, which is the nature of the Self. A life of karma yoga becomes a life of discovering freedom from insecurity, freedom from sorrow. One gets absolute freedom when one recognizes the true nature of ātmā. But this is not an event that happens some day. It is a process of discovering security and self-sufficiency. The process begins with one seeking refuge in the right attitude and culminates with one seeking refuge in self-knowledge, *paramārthajñānaśaraṇo bhava.*<sup>7</sup> Even while one is a karma yogi, one's goal is self-knowledge. Then alone karma yoga is possible.

### **Performing karma as a devotee of Īśvara**

It is true that performing action for satisfying a desire is much easier. When one performs an action merely for gaining a material result then one is a kṛpaṇa, a miser. A miser accumulates wealth with great difficulty but cannot part with that wealth. When one spends the money on oneself, one, no doubt, gains happiness. The money used to help somebody, to remove the person's pain and suffering, produces much more puṇya and much more happiness than spending the money for one's own gratification. This is what the scriptures say. This is the best return of investment of the money. It makes sense also because we would expect somebody to help us if we are in need. Someone in need expects the same from us. When one acts this way, one is following the commonly sensed values, the basic harmony in the creation. When one follows the harmony, then one is doing the right thing. The miserliness, kṛpaṇatā, denies one the benefit of being in harmony. The money spent for one's own gratification is the opportunity cost. Similarly, a person does not know the value of karma. Karma performed to satisfy one's desire will produce some happiness. However, the karma performed for the sake of fulfilling someone else's desire will produce puṇya that will neutralize the raga/dveṣa, thereby giving rise to antaḥkaraṇa suddhi leading to self-knowledge. Just as a person who spends money for self-gratification deprives himself of the much greater gain that would have come by contributing that money to a needy person, similarly also, a person who performs karma merely for self-centeredness or satisfying personal desires deprives himself of the much greater benefit that will come in the way of antaḥkaraṇa suddhi and lasting happiness by performing the same action with the attitude of other-centeredness. This is the emphasis Lord Kṛṣṇa makes by stressing the importance of performing karma with the right attitude.

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<sup>7</sup> Bhagavad Gītā Śaṅkara bhāṣya, verse 2.49.

The thirst for a personal reward is born of the rājasik motivation. Lord Kṛṣṇa advises to change the motivation to a sātvik motivation. Just as money should be looked upon as the means to do dānam, karma should be looked upon as an opportunity to contribute. There is, of course, a choice, either to perform the action for one's benefit or for the benefit of someone else. One has the freedom to entertain the other-centered attitude towards karma. No doubt it is very difficult. The world gives importance only to the outcome of the action as that's the only objective criterion to judge the actor. That a person performs a karma with the attitude of other-centeredness is neither quantifiable nor does the world attach a value to it. The materialistic world is not sensitive to what is not measurable. We have to acknowledge this in the world, in the work place or whatever be the action-field one finds oneself in. Thus, there is the additional responsibility that a karma yogi should perform the karma as best as anyone else will and at the same time maintain as best as possible the attitude of other-centeredness. This is possible because the karma yogi has a clear understanding that the purpose of life is for gaining self-knowledge, that self-centered attitude is ignorance which gives rise to insecurity, that raga/dveṣa is an expression of that insecurity and that actions performed with self-centeredness will only perpetuate the insecurity centered on the self. Accordingly, he/she has the correct values and attitudes such that one's raga/dveṣas are not given importance and strives to perform the karma for pleasing Īśvara, as Śaṅkara writes, kevalamīśvarārtham kuru karmāṇi<sup>8</sup>. The meaning is one performs the action as a devotee of Īśvara. This is the fifth guiding principle of karma yoga.

It is easy to perform an act of pūjā or worship at an altar as a devotee. There is no other pressurizing factor and it is easy to invoke the devotee in oneself. However, while performing a worldly action, there are so many pressurizing factors and it is difficult to invoke the devotee in oneself. This is understandable. But ultimately the goal is to perform the action kevalamīśvarārtham. The criterion for the action is only satisfaction of Īśvara and not at all ego satisfaction. There is absolutely no expectation, even for an acknowledgement or appreciation for the action performed. Even the expectation that these actions should bring one's antahkarana suddhi is also not there. When the mind is pre-occupied with some expectation, then to that extent there is less attention to the quality of the action. When action itself becomes a reward, one can apply oneself wholeheartedly to performing the action. One need not wait for satisfaction in future. What one does in keeping with the commonly sensed values with the spirit of contribution, with the spirit of offering to the Lord and with other-centeredness, is itself the source of satisfaction. To the extent that there is the expectation of a reward one is a kṛpāṇa. One is losing the advantage that action can produce for oneself in terms of antahkarana suddhi.

To be Continued...

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<sup>8</sup>Bhagavad Gītā Śaṅkara bhāṣya, verse 2.48.