

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

## Human pursuit

Every human being wants to be happy. One tries to be happy by removing the causes for one's unhappiness. Typically, one does this by rearranging the things around like, house, job, etc. In the context of the Bhagavad Gītā, Arjuna wanted to be happy as well. He believed that the war was the cause for his unhappiness. In general, our conclusion is that the cause of our unhappiness is "out there" and consequently we try to get rid of it. The basic problems of humanity are *śoka* (sadness) and *moha* (delusion). Arjuna had the same. Even though the specific situation that he faced may not be applicable to us, the spirit of the context is no doubt applicable. Gītā helps one to get rid of the *śoka* and *moha*. One may ask as to what the connection between one's desire to be happy and the removal of *śoka* and *moha* is. The answer lies in the fundamental truth about oneself namely, that happiness is one's true nature. Just as when the clouds that cover the sun are removed the sun becomes visible, so too the removal of *śoka* and *moha* helps one to recognize one's true nature. Greed, anger, etc. are nothing but manifestations of the *śoka* and *moha* only. Bhagavad Gita's teaching is to free us from these. When the layers of cloud are removed, the sun becomes more and more visible. Similarly, as layers of *śoka* and *moha* are removed, one discovers gradually the true nature of one's happy self. Thus, one can be one's own witness in every step of the pursuit of happiness validating that one is in the right path to achieve it.

## Doing what is right is a social responsibility

Although Arjuna went to the battlefield to fight, seeing his kith and kin and the revered teachers suddenly had serious misgivings about the war. He was grief stricken on account of the destruction the war will bring. He found himself incapable of overcoming his grief and had no motivation to proceed with the war. In this context, Lord Kṛṣṇa asked Arjuna to perform his duty. It was not the lack of skill that stopped Arjuna from doing his duty. He was overcome with *śoka*. Lord Kṛṣṇa teaches that the way to become free from grief/depression is to do what is right in a given situation. Doing what is right is important for one's own happiness. As a *kṣatriya* (belonging to the warrior class), Arjuna was expected to perform his duty and the people depended on him to do it. The enemies of Arjuna were threatening the social fabric and Arjuna was duty bound to set things right. There must be a basis for people to interact with each other. Honesty, sincerity and trust are essential elements of this interaction. When these are threatened or absent, then people will find it difficult to interact. This will lead to disorder. Therefore, right values, dharma, honesty are required for a society's progress and prosperity. In effect, Arjuna was not fighting for himself, but for the whole society's welfare. Gita verse 3.8 asks us to do our obligatory duties.

नियतं कुरु कर्म त्वं कर्म ज्यायो ह्यकर्मणः ।

शरीरयात्रापि च ते न प्रसिद्धोदकर्मणः ॥

*niyataṁ kuru karma tvaṁ karma jyāyo hyakarmaṇaḥ |*  
*śarīrayātrāpi ca te na prasiddhyedakarmaṇaḥ || Gītā 3.8*

As a *kṣatriya*, Arjuna had a duty to uphold dharma. But, he was deluded into thinking that the war with his cousins and relatives was unpleasant and hence was the cause of his sorrow. He did not want to fight the war. Lord Kṛṣṇa advises him in this verse *niyatam kuru karma tvam* (Do your duty).

### **Attitude towards duties**

There is no such thing as “pleasant” or “unpleasant”. One must focus on one’s duty. Failure is not the cause of unhappiness. Our thinking that “I failed” is the reason for unhappiness. Our identification with the outcome is the cause for the unhappiness. Instead, one should identify with oneself and focus on the duty. This is nothing but taking responsibility for that one has control over (*Gita 2.47 karmanyevādhikāraṣṭe*). We control the effort and not the outcome and hence we should judge ourselves based on the effort and not based on the outcome. One can aim and release an arrow towards a target. But, once the arrow leaves the bow, we have no control over it. One’s conclusion that “I am a failure” is due to ignorance. Understand that we are the cause of the effort (provisionally, for now. Later on, Gītā teaches that one is not a doer) and not of the outcome. All our situations are given. When one does not judge oneself as a failure, one becomes free from the grips of *śoka*.

When we are presented with the choice to perform, we must do only what is right and not what is convenient. Arjuna wanted to avoid pain by leaving the battlefield. Similarly, we look for a convenient way out to avoid our duties. Overtime, one gets addicted to avoiding pain and seeking pleasure. One’s own nature will make one regret when one avoids one’s duties. In Gita verse 18.60, Lord Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna “Out of delusion, being definitely bound by your own action, which is born of your natural disposition, you will helplessly do just what you do not wish to do.” The second half of verse 3.8 addresses the disadvantage of not doing one’s duties, which are the right actions. Right action sustains one’s own body and the entire universe.

### **The need to perform duties**

We are what we are because of the continuation of the whole universe. The universe is an interconnected system. While science recognizes that the universe is connected by physical laws, Vedanta states that the moral and spiritual laws also need to be included. In Gītā, Lord Kṛṣṇa states *mayi sarvam idam protam* (All this is woven in Me just as the beads in a string, verse 7.7). Universe is a harmonious/organic whole. It is connected by the principle of cooperation, just as the various parts of our body are interconnected. Modern environmental studies teach us that every creature has a role to play. In effect, everything contributes to what we are.

In the Vedic vision, the whole universe is a manifestation of *Īśvara*. For example, *puruṣa sūktam* paints a symbolic vision of the universe as *Īśvara's* limbs, heads, etc. But, out of our greed/insensitivity, we destroy this order. We have to understand that the universe is not for our exploitation and enjoyment. We must understand that we are part of the whole and everything contributes to everything else. As we are interconnected, each one of our decisions affects others in the society. So, when we find ourselves in a situation, we do what we are supposed to do for the harmony of the society. Therefore, for harmony, each one has to do duties. The elements of the nature perform their duties, and so should we. Every atom and molecule of the universe participates in the cosmic *yajña*. That we offer is important and not what we offer. Veda recognizes this as the spirit of *yajña*.

## **The role of scriptures**

All beings and matter of the universe perform their duties. Except human, nothing else needs to be told of this. We have a “free will” and so quite often we violate it due to our inner pressures. Selfishness in us leads us to *kāma*, *krodha*, *lobha*, etc. (desire, anger, greed, etc). There is a craving to satiate the greed rather than fulfill a need. We seem to cross the boundaries. For example, we tend to eat over and above our physical need. No other creature seems to do that. Therefore, scriptures prescribe “do-s” and “don’t-s” for human beings. Many a time, one may not like one’s duty. For example, one may think that in one’s current duty/job there is no visibility, that this job is no good, etc. But, understanding that one is part of the whole, one must perform the duty with a spirit of happiness and fulfillment.

## **Action has the potential to bind**

An individual is bound by karma. Whenever an action is performed, there will be a *karmaphala* in accordance with the action. The doer is accountable for facing the *karmaphala*. Every situation that one encounters is a result of one’s earlier action/actions. One’s reaction/response of happiness or unhappiness is then driven by one’s expectation of the outcome of an action. When the expectation is met, one is happy. Labeling the outcome as favorable makes one happy and to conclude that one is successful. On the contrary, if the outcome is labelled unfavorable one is unhappy and concludes that one is unsuccessful. Let us examine if such a labeling is a good thing. When “success” happens, one wants to get more and more of it. For example, if it is money, one wants more and more of it. If one has a million, one wants some more millions. If one has a billion, one wants some more billions and so on. We compare ourselves with people of different classes at every level. So, for the same quantum of happiness, whatever generates that, we need more of it. One gets locked in the cycle of chasing more and doing more. One’s inner compulsion takes over and one is unable to exercise one’s “free will”. This is bondage. Even though one may label this compulsion as a drive to succeed, it is essentially bondage. One is unable to enjoy the quietude of the mind. One is constantly seeking approval from others and the need for it keeps growing. In effect, one’s own success leads to sadness and unhappiness. As long as one does not have the freedom to do or not to do, one is essentially in bondage. Every karma/action becomes a seed for another, which in turn can produce either happiness or unhappiness. We are caught in the cycle. In this cycle, we are either concerned about the future or feel sad about the failures of the past. One is not able to live in the moment.

## **How to break this cycle?**

We seem to be caught in the never ending cycle of *duḥkhaṃ...duḥkhaṃ..duḥkhaṃ..Duḥkhaṃ...duḥkhaṃ...Sukhaṃ... duḥkhaṃ* and so on. An examination of our lives show that our actions have led to a series of satisfactory or unsatisfactory outcomes. Is there a way to break this cycle and be happy always? Lord Kṛṣṇa in verse 3.9 of Bhagavad Gītā recommends how the actions should be performed so that this cycle can be broken and produce a series of *sukham*/happiness.

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.