

## Karma Yoga Rahasyam

*Continued from February 2019 issue. Article by Dr.V. Swaminathan*

A story is told in the kauṣītakibrāhmaṇopaniṣat<sup>1</sup> 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 9<sup>th</sup> chapter, "*teṣāṃ yogakṣemaṃ vahāmyaham* - I take care of their yoga (giving them what they need) and kṣema (protecting what they have)." <sup>2</sup> 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 *manīṣiṇaḥ*, 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Kauṣītakibrāhmaṇopaniṣat, 3rd Chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Bhagavad Gītā, Chapter 9, v.22.

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 abidance 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. 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<sup>3</sup>. 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.

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<sup>3</sup> 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.)

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.

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.

Lord Kṛṣṇa asks us to tap the happiness from where it is. At present, one is trying to get happiness from things that don't have happiness. Instead, one taps happiness from oneself as happiness is the true nature of oneself. How does one do that? The answer is with the right attitude which is the spirit of contribution. Any small act of contribution, without any agenda, simply by being helpful, one derives the self-satisfaction. That one is able to help is a privilege, is a great gift from Īśvara. Holding onto things out of insecurity is *kalilam*, the turbidity. Letting them go requires one to adopt a sense of security in Īśvara that indeed, He really takes care of everything. Insecurity is a construct of the mind which assumes the worst-case scenarios. This can be defeated only with the attitude that one is an instrument in the hands of Īśvara and that one can act as a contributor only because of His abundant grace. Living a life in this manner, in course of time, one's buddhi progressively becomes free from the inner turbidity caused by attachments and aversions.

How does one know that one is becoming free from turbidity? The answer is given in the 2<sup>nd</sup> line. One gains *nirvedam*, dispassion, accompanied with inner satisfaction and inner comfort. As one gains self gratification, one becomes free from the need to find gratification from outside.

One's demands continuously drop off. To the extent that one is comfortable with oneself, to that extent one becomes less needy, to that extent one's expectations will go down, and to that extent one can accept gracefully the things as they are. One becomes objective. One gains dispassion towards things of this world (śrutam) as well as that of the other-world (śrotavya). Lord Kṛṣṇa makes it clear that what is available in the otherworld (i.e., heaven) is also nothing but another version of this world only. And what one gets in heaven is because of puṇya earned through some karma. No one gets anything free. Even in this world also, any little pleasure that one gets, such as by eating a cone of ice cream, comes from one's purva puṇya. It is the fructification of one's past virtuous deeds that gives happiness. If they do not fructify, then ice cream will not give happiness. Whatever pleasure one gets do not come from the objects, but it is a result of one's puṇya karma. Similarly, whatever pain one gets is because of one's pāpa karma. Lord Kṛṣṇa points out that the setup is not very different in heaven also. Once the puṇya karma is exhausted, one has to leave the heaven and return to this world only<sup>4</sup>.

The puṇya born of niṣkāma karma neutralizes pāpa, which manifests as the turbidity of all the attachments and aversions. Gradually, one becomes free from them. One does not have to wait for mokṣa to be happy. Happiness comes at every step of the process. Living a life of karma yoga, an inner transformation takes place and one becomes more and more happy with oneself.

**Concluded**

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<sup>4</sup>"te taṃ bhuktvā svargalokaṃ viśālaṃ kṣīṇe puṇye martyalokaṃ viśanti," Bhagavad Gītā, Chapter 9, v.21.

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Editor.