

The concept of yajña in the Bhagavad Gītā¹

Continuation from last issue...

Objective mind is an effective mind

We are not effective when we are not composed. When we have the right attitude, I make correct judgment. To assess a situation and come to a decision, we need an objective, composed mind. We become more efficient. It allows us to have an effective relationship with the near and dear. That is emotional maturity. Along with IQ, we need EQ (Emotional Quotient) and SQ (Spiritual Quotient).

Do the right actions without attachment

With the emotional maturity, even as we do the right actions, it is possible that we seek reward and encouragement. Lord Kṛṣṇa advises us to remain free from attachment (मुक्तसङ्गः). Typically, we are not satisfied with just the outcome; we want more than that. For example, we want to be recognized and appreciated for our efforts. We seem to have an agenda always. We seek visibility, personal reward, praise and gratification. Lord Kṛṣṇa advises us to be free from these attachments to the outcomes, to leave the outcomes to Īśvara (BG verse 2.47) and treat them as prasāda. It seems to be a tall order because we got habituated to the rewards. The Bhagavad Gītā instructs us to shift our motivation from karmaphala to karma. Even as we do the actions without attachment, Lord Kṛṣṇa advises us to do them properly, in the right manner and whole heartedly (समाचर-सम्यक् आचर). We do the actions as a self-offering all through our life. We offer our ignorance, resentment, anger, etc. We use every occasion to do this offering. This is the best way to purge these tendencies. We need to understand that getting rid of these tendencies and hence our sorrow is same as creating everlasting happiness.

Two paths of action

Performing an action with an attitude other than the spirit of offering, binds the person (यज्ञार्थात् कर्मणोऽन्यत्र कर्मबन्धनः). Doing with the spirit of offering the action liberates the person. Actions performed without a personal agenda lead to freedom. Kathopaniṣat says that two contrasting options (1.2.4, दूरमेते विपरेते विषूची) are presented to a human being, śreyas and preyas (1.2.2, श्रेयश्च प्रेयश्च). Having clearly considered them, a discriminating person chooses śreyas rather than preyas. The former frees and the latter binds. We find ourselves chasing the path of self-gratification and in that process are driven further and further into bondage. Whereas, when the actions are performed with the spirit of offering, the ego is neutralized and rāga and dveṣa are subdued.

Human beings versus other creatures

सहयज्ञाः प्रजाः सृष्ट्वा पुरोवाच प्रजापतिः ।
अनेन प्रसविष्यध्वमेष वोऽस्तिवष्टकामधुक् ॥

sahayajñāḥ prajāḥ sṛṣṭvā purovāca prajāpatiḥ |
anena prasaviṣyadhvameṣa vo'stviṣṭakāmadhuk || Gītā 3.10

In verse 3.10, Lord Kṛṣṇa states that the creator created the universe and all its beings, including the human beings. The rest of the creation has an inbuilt order, whereas human beings are endowed with “free will.” Free will gives us the freedom to do or not to do an action. We could choose to do the right action or an action that is convenient. We may choose to perform an action to avoid pain or to hurt others. Other creatures don't have the free will to choose their actions. So, human beings need guidance on how best to utilize the freedom. Otherwise, the freedom can be misused. So, the creator gave the gift of yajña to the human beings. Prajāpati, the creator, said, “By this yajña shall you prosper. May this yajña be a bestower of desired objects (wish-fulfilling cow).” Other beings surrender to the creator and accept whatever is given. Their needs of आहार-निद्रा-मैथुन (food, shelter and procreation) are provided for.

Cooperative effort

This universe is for all the creatures. We may ask why there are mosquitoes. They have as much right to exist as we do. Living in cooperation, in harmony with the creation, is yajña. In a cooperative effort, one's duty is more important than one's need. I do my duty to fulfill your need and you do the same.

देवान्भावयतानेन ते देवा भावयन्तु वः।

परस्परं भावयन्तः श्रेयः परमवाप्स्यथ॥

devānbhāvayatānena te devā bhāvayantu vaḥ |

parasparam bhāvayantaḥ śreyaḥ paramavāpsyatha || Gītā 3.11

In verse 3.11, Lord Kṛṣṇa says, “By the spirit of cooperative effort, may you propitiate the gods देवान् भावयतानेन. In turn, they propitiate you and fulfill your needs ते देवा भावयन्तु वः.”

Pañca mahā yajna

Vedas talk about five types of living beings; devatās, rishis (preceptors), pitṛs (ancestors), manuṣyas (human), bhūtas (all other living creatures like animals and plants). Vedas present human beings as central to the entire universe. They also instructed what we should do so that our actions automatically become an offering. All are manifestations of Īśvara. We are all interconnected and we should live a life such that the needs of all the living beings are taken care of. All living beings depend on the humans and in turn they depend on them. It is said that human beings are born with five debts (ṛṇas) - deva-ṛṇa, riṣi-ṛṇa, pitṛ-ṛṇa, manuṣya-ṛṇa and bhūta-ṛṇa.²Accordingly, we are required to perform five yajñas, called pañca mahā yajnas, every day of our life.³ They are: deva-yajña, riṣi-yajña, pitṛ-yajña, manuṣya-yajña and bhūta-yajña. Offering to various devatās is deva-yajña. Learning and teaching scriptures is riṣi-yajña. Doing śrāddhā for manes and continuing the family lineage so that the offering can continue is pitṛ-yajña. As a householder, offering services to guests is manuṣya-yajña. Providing for birds, ants, cows, trees, etc. is bhūta-yajña. A human being is expected to live conscious of this daily duty. देवान् in verse 3.11 includes all the above types of yajña. When we perform actions with the spirit of offering, the offerings come back to us as blessings. By this there is a mutual prosperity स्त्रेयः पदम् अवाप्स्यथ.

Cooperation vs Competition

इष्टान्भोगान् हि वो देवा दास्यन्ते यज्ञभविताः।

तैर्दत्तानप्रदायैभ्यो यो भुङ्क्ते स्तेन एव सः॥

iṣṭānbhogānhi vo devā dāsyante yajñabhavitāḥ |

tairdattānapradāyaibhyo yo bhun̄kte stena eva saḥ || Gītā 3.12

In verse 3.12, Lord Kṛṣṇa teaches the key to worldly and spiritual prosperity in conformity to dharma. He recommends the adoption of the cooperative system for human prosperity. All these beings propitiated as described above, they give us the desirable objects -

इष्टान्भोगान्नि वो देवा दास्यन्ते यज्ञभविताः

Let us compare and contrast the cooperative lifestyle with the competitive lifestyle prevailing today:

| Cooperative | Competitive |
|--|--|
| सात्विक - sātvik in nature | राजसिक / ताम्सिक- rājasik/tāmasik in nature |
| Attitude of offering is important | Attitude of grabbing and selfish ends are important |
| Invokes charity, compassion and kindness in us | Invokes greed, jealousy, anger, etc. in us |
| Help each other and all the beings | Hurt each other and the environment |
| Removes stress | Builds stress |
| All beings are equal | Dubbed as a system of equal opportunity, but in practice, it is winner who gets all. Only winner gets respect. |
| Leads to everlasting happiness | May give short-lived happiness |
| Liberates the person | Binds the person |

Don't be a moral thief

In the second half of verse 3.12, Lord Kṛṣṇa condemns the person who enjoys the objects given by other beings but does not adopt the attitude of offering in return. Such fellows are moral thieves, says Lord Kṛṣṇa -
तैर्दत्तानप्रदायैभ्यो यो भुङ्क्ते स्तेन एव सः ॥

One may say that nobody follows the cooperative lifestyle and that it is not practical. But, with a little introspection, one can deduce that wealth and comfort do not necessarily equal happiness. All creatures contribute to one's life. If one becomes insensible and is only a consumer, then one is violating the order and is not joining the order. Really speaking, one is sowing the seed of unhappiness for oneself. One can choose to let the world be what it is and for oneself and family adopt the spirit of cooperation. As Lord Kṛṣṇa states such a lifestyle is a wish-fulfilling cow.

Key to release oneself from sins

यज्ञशिष्टाशिनः सन्तो मुच्यन्ते सर्वकिल्बिषैः ।

भुञ्जते ते त्वघं पापा ये पचन्त्यामकारणात् ॥

yajñaśiṣṭāśinaḥ santo mucyante sarvakilbiṣaiḥ |

bhuñjate te tvaghaṁ pāpā ye pacantyātmakāraṇāt || Gītā 3.13

To whatever one earns there is an unseen contribution by all the other five types of beings discussed earlier. Those who offer to these beings and then take for themselves whatever is left are released from all sins, says Lord Kṛṣṇa in verse 3.13. In the earlier days, harvest from agriculture was offered to the village temple, priests, carpenter, etc. and whatever is left is taken for themselves. This spirit still applies and so one needs to follow it in one's life. Devatās, rishis, ancestors, other human beings and living beings, all contributed. It is only fair that I contribute my share and take whatever is left as prasāda. In the second half of the verse 3.13, Lord Kṛṣṇa says that a self-centered consumer only accrues papa ते पापाः भुञ्जते. So, it is a matter of being sensitive, being a contributor and get released from sins.

Play your role in the cosmic order and be prosperous

Lord Kṛṣṇa brings to our attention to the universe around us in verses 3.14 and 3.15.

अन्नाद्भवन्ति भूतानि पर्जन्यादन्नसम्भवः ।

यज्ञाद्भवति पर्जन्यो यज्ञः कर्म समुद्भवः ॥

annādbhavanti bhūtāni parjanyaḍannasambhavaḥ |
yajñādbhavati parjanya yajñaḥ karma samudbhavaḥ || Gītā 3.14

कर्म ब्रह्मोद्भवं विद्धि ब्रह्माक्षरसमुद्भवम् ।

तस्मात्सर्वगतं ब्रह्म नित्यं यज्ञे प्रतिष्ठितम् ॥

karma brahmodbhavaḥ vidhi brahmākṣarasamudbhavam |
tasmātsarvagataḥ brahma nityaḥ yajñe patiṣṭhitam || Gītā 3.15

All living beings are products of food. Food is possible because of rains. Society's adherence to the spirit of offering, yajña, causes rains. Yajña is, in turn, born of duty, कर्म. Duties are prescribed by vedas, ब्रह्म. The varṇāśrama structure has this spirit built in. It was meant to create a cooperative society. By adhering to this cycle, the Vedic society achieved prosperity. It was prosperous because people followed dharma. So, whenever one makes an effort of contribution, it is useful to others. One must always assess on the basis of what one has and not on the basis of what one does not have. One shall keep in mind 3 T's that one can offer to others: Time, Talent and Treasure. The grace of Īśvara is involved whenever our conduct is in conformity with the spirit of yajña. As rivers bring water to all, sun brings light to all, when we act in the spirit of yajña, Īśvara's grace also comes to us. This cosmic order helps us understand the beautiful insight about this world. It is a matter of being sensitive and being worshipful about the universe. These verses teach us how to live our life in harmony with this order. It brings inner harmony. So, by adhering to this order and by living a life of offering, in addition to worldly prosperity, Lord Kṛṣṇa says that one will attain spiritual prosperity as well श्रेयः परम् अवाप्स्यथ(3.11).

Conclusion

Human beings want happiness. The teachings of the Bhagavad Gītā help one to discover this happiness in oneself by bringing the spirit of offering, yajña, into one's life. To begin with, one practices the attitude of yajña deliberately. With clarity and understanding, one learns to interpret the situations so that one's actions are done with an attitude of offering. Īśvara's grace is present wherever this spirit is followed. Even though Īśvara's grace is everywhere, just as sunlight is available only for those that keep the window open, may one gain His grace through yajña.

¹ 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.