

Notes  
on  
**KARMA YOGA**



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# PREFACE

During the last century, there has been witnessed a great resurgence in the study of ancient cultures around the world. This is mainly due to the vast changes society has undergone in recent times, leading to a faster tempo of life. This has brought in its wake attendant problems like stress in life, pollution in the environment, a radical change in the value system of society etc. Buffeted by these problems, mankind has struggled to find contemporary solutions for them. Having failed to do so, it has turned its attention to ancient cultures for possible solutions.

Yoga is one such ancient solution to modern problems. It has received great impetus during the last half-century and has now spread all over the world. This has resulted in increasing the popularity of Yoga all around, but it has also led at the same time to many innovations, some desirable, but most of them undesirable. Hence, there is a need to present Yoga in its traditional form for the benefit of the discerning public.

Swāmi Vivēkānanda, a little more than a century ago, placed Yoga in its proper perspective by categorizing it into four interactive parts – Jñāna Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Rāja Yoga and Karma Yoga. This classification has been followed in all courses offered by the Vivēkānanda Yoga Anusandhāna Samsthāna (VYĀSA), Bangalore, India, at all levels starting from the basic one-month course for yoga instructors upto the Master's and Doctoral

stages.

Karma Yoga, the theme of this book, has been one of the compulsory subjects in all courses and is considered very important from the practical point of view. There has been a consistent demand from the student community for a standardized book based upon the prescribed syllabus. Hence, the authors took upon themselves the task of preparing these Notes on Karma Yoga, not only for the use of the student community but also for the public at large.

Many people have helped us in the preparation of this book. Special mention should be made of Śrī Ramesh, who meticulously went through the manuscript and gave many useful suggestions. Several students, who studied this subject as part of their curriculum, have given useful feedback, which helped us in the organisation of the material. Śrī NateshBābu helped us in preparing the manuscript for printing. We are also grateful to the Sharadh Enterprises, the printers, who have brought out the book in an attractive format.

We hope the readers will find the book useful. We look forward to comments and suggestions, which will help us in revising the material to keep the book up-to-date.

**NVC Swamy**

**H R Nagendra**

**Heisnam Jina Devi**

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**Chapter - 1**

**INTRODUCTION**

Swāmi Vivēkānanda, the carrier of the message of Śrī Ramakṛṣṇa to the West, paid two visits to the United States and Europe during his lifetime. The first visit was between July 1893 and December 1896 and the second was between July 1899 and December 1900.

It was during his first visit that he delivered most of his famous lectures on Yoga which have come down to us in the form of his four books: Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Rāja Yoga and Jñāna Yoga.

The book on Rāja Yoga contains a set of eight lectures followed by a commentary on the aphorisms of Patanjali. Commenting on the 25th Sutra of the second chapter, the Sadhana Pada,

तदभावात् संयोगाभावो हानं तददृशेः कैवल्यम् ॥२५॥

(There being absence of ignorance, there is absence of junction, which is the thing- to -be -avoided; that is the independence of the seer), Swāmi Vivēkānanda has given us probably the most famous of his quotations:

*“Each soul is potentially Divine The Goal is to manifest this Divinity within”*,

*by controlling nature, external & internal.*

*Do this either by work, or worship or psychic control, or philosophy - by one, or more, or all of these - and be free. This is the whole of religion.*

*Doctrines, or Dogmas, or Rituals, or Books, or Temples, or Forms, are but secondary details.*

In this quotation, Swāmiji was basically referring to the four Yogas: Karma Yoga (work), Bhakti Yoga (worship), Rāja Yoga (psychic control) and Jñāna Yoga (philosophy).

Each one of these Yogas demands from its practitioner certain qualities. Bhakti Yoga demands belief and faith in the existence of the Divine Being. Rāja Yoga demands a highly ethical way of life with control of mind. Jñāna Yoga insists upon a sharp intelligence and analytical capability, with no compromise in facing Reality. However, the only qualification demanded by Karma Yoga is selflessness in performing actions.

In the modern context, it is easy to take to the paths of Bhakti, Rāja, and Jñāna Yogas. In India especially, of late, there has been a proliferation of places of worship of all religions, giving an opportunity to people to practice Bhakti Yoga through devotional exercises. Jñāna Yoga, based on the Upanishads, which have been the prerogative of a selected few, has now become

freely available to all, through the translation of Sanskrit scriptures into English and regional languages. Today, there is no bar on anyone from studying the scriptures. A large number of distinguished personalities have in recent years established Aśramas, where regular lectures on scriptural texts of all types are delivered.

So far as Rāja Yoga, and its branch Haṭha Yoga is concerned, a large number of Yoga centers has sprung up during the last century all over the world, giving an opportunity to people to learn techniques of Āsana, Prāṇāyama, Meditation, etc.

It is only when we turn to Karma Yoga that we face a peculiar situation. Unlike the other types of Yoga, in which one can find a large number of scriptural texts and teachers, reference to Karma Yoga is to be found only in one text, namely the Bhagavad Gītā.

What is the essence of Karma Yoga? Śrī Kṛṣṇa says in the third chapter of the Bhagavad Gītā,

न हि कश्चित् क्षणमपि जातु तिष्ठत्यकर्मकृत्  
कार्यते ह्यवशः कर्म सर्वः प्रकृतिजैर्गुणैः॥

[BG 3-5]

(No one can live on this earth for even a single moment without performing some action or other, driven by

the three gunas of nature, namely Sattva, Rajas and Tamas). According to this śloka, action is inevitable. The first action we perform in our life is the cry with which we come out of the womb of the mother and the last one is the deep sigh with which we leave the world. Between these two extremities of life is a long series of actions, without which, Śrī Kṛṣṇa explains in the Gītā,

शरीरयात्रापि च ते न प्रसिद्ध्येदकर्मणः॥

[BG 3-5]

(Even the maintenance of the body is not possible). So, actions are inevitable and unavoidable. How do we turn something inevitable and unavoidable into a benefit? This is what Karma Yoga is all about. It gives us a method by which we can face life boldly and turn all actions we perform into a means for self-growth, self-development and self-realization.

## ***Chapter - 2***

# **KARMA**

Karma is used generally in the sense of action. By action, we usually mean tasks performed by the body. But, in a more general sense, action also refers to mentation and thought. Hence, action is usually considered to be of three types: bodily (*kāyika*), through speech (*vācika*) and mental (*mānasika*).

In our waking state, we perform all the three kinds of actions. In the dream state, we perform actions only in the mind. In the deep- sleep state, it appears as if we are not performing any actions. However, we do undergo an experience of happiness, which gets lodged in the *citta*, which itself is a form of thought or action.

Actions can also be classified in another way into five categories, namely, daily actions (*nitya*), occasional actions (*naimittika*), prohibited actions (*niṣiddha*), propitiatory actions (*prāyaścitta*) and actions with desire (*kāmya*). Daily actions are also sometimes known as obligatory actions, in the sense that without performing them no human being can live comfortably in this world. In ancient days, every human being had to perform five kinds of activity everyday, which were called *Pancayajña*. He had to worship the Divine

(Brahma yajña). He had to remember with gratitude his ancestors (Pitr yajña), he had to take care of the environment (Deva yajña), he had to feed guests (Manuṣya yajña) and share his food with animals (Prāṇi yajña). The belief was that these activities would generate in the human being good samskāras, which would help in the building up his character in this life and bring him benefits and happiness in future lives also. Not performing them would not generate bad samskāras directly, but would have an impact on his attitude to nature, fellow human beings and other creatures, leading to bad samskāras. Hence, it was tacitly assumed that these daily actions were to be performed mandatorily not only for one's own satisfaction and benefit but also for the welfare of others.

In today's context, daily activities need to be reinterpreted. These represent the fulfillment of one's responsibilities towards the family, the community and the society at large. Performance of one's duties may not be financially rewarding, but it certainly conduces to the welfare of society. Needless to say, this forms an important component of the welfare of society.

The second type of activities refers to those, which have to be performed only on specific occasions. For

example, the duties associated with rituals like naming ceremony for a baby, the Upanayana, the marriage ceremony, and even the obligatory rites for the departed. These activities also should be undertaken with a sense of duty and obligation. By not performing them, one may interfere with the smooth functioning of society. By performing them, one would help in the maintenance of the fabric of society.

The third kind of activity is strictly forbidden for the human being. Every society has its own code of conduct and a legal framework. Every religion also identifies certain actions, which are harmful to others and to oneself in the long run. The Dharmasūtras of Hinduism, the teachings of great people like Buddha and Mahavīra, the Ten Commandments of Christianity, etc. contain these rules for individual behavior. In the modern context, there is a wider meaning attached to these activities. They are forbidden according to the tenets enshrined in the constitutions of various countries. In a sense, the modern constitutions are also Dharmaśāstrās to be obeyed by individual members of the society.

What is one supposed to do if such forbidden actions are done deliberately or inadvertently? There is always a possibility of atonement, an action that is considered

to nullify the negative aspects of forbidden actions. The most common method is an apology. It is often quipped that the most difficult words of the English language to pronounce are “I am sorry”!

What happens if we do not resort to this way of atonement? Committing forbidden actions is then likely to become a habit with us. Constant repetition of any action leads to that action becoming a part of our nature. This could be either to our advantage or disadvantage. Therefore, atonement for performing a forbidden action can also become a part of our nature, provided we develop the habit of politeness and concern in dealing with fellow human beings and creatures. It is indeed a fact that anything in life can be turned to our advantage, provided we adopt the proper approach to it.

Most of our activities are due to our desires. There is always some motive or other behind all our actions. Such actions are called **Kāmya Karma** i.e. actions due to desires. Desires arise in our mind as thoughts, which lead us to the planning of how to fulfill these desires. This is known as **Sankalpa**. When this **Sankalpa** materializes in the form of action, whether it is physical, mental or vocal, it becomes **Kāmya Karma**.

There is a mistaken impression among a section of

students of Vedānta that such actions are harmful. This is an extreme point of view, which has no justification. Any actions performed, which are likely to benefit us, motivate us. It is quite likely that such actions, while benefiting us, may harm others. When we do not take cognisance of this fact and continue to indulge in such actions, we are succumbing to selfish desires. It is these kinds of actions which need to be avoided.

There is another kind of action motivated by desires. Such an action not only benefits us, but also helps others in the process. The motivation behind such actions is what is known as “Enlightened Self-interest”. Most actions performed by people, who follow ethical principles, belong to this category.

There is yet another kind of action done with desire. In this, we are not so much concerned about what we are likely to get, but more concerned about how it is going to benefit others. Such actions come under the category of “Philanthropy”. These are actions, which may not benefit us materially, but bring us a lot of mental satisfaction.

This can be illustrated by an example. In our country, the Hindus follow the rituals of worship or pūja on certain special occasions. The worship commences

with what is known as “Sankalpa Vākya”, i.e. what we hope to achieve in the form of material benefits through this worship. We make a plea to the Divine to fulfill our desires, by providing it with something like a shopping list. However, at the end of the pūja or worship, our mind finds itself transformed into a higher plane and we feel how selfish it has been on our part to make such requests to the Divine. Therefore, towards the end of the worship, we recite a mantra, surrendering everything we have done to the Divine itself. It is in this way that we are able to raise our actions from the lowest level of selfish desire to the highest level of selfless action. It is thus seen that not all actions that commence with a desire need to be avoided.

There is, of course, the highest kind of selfless action, in which we forget about ourselves in helping or serving others. These are the actions performed by a true Karma Yogi. We will be discussing this in greater detail in the pages to follow.

### *Chapter - 3*

## **THE CONCEPT OF REBIRTH**

There is a story in the Old Testament of the Bible, in the Book of Genesis. It talks of the two children of Adam and Eve- Cain and Abel. Abel became a shepherd and raised a flock of sheep. Abel dedicated the first crop of wool to the Lord. The Lord was pleased and blessed Abel. Cain, on the other hand, became a farmer and tilled the land to grow wheat. As soon as he had the first harvest, he dedicated it to the Lord. However, for reasons unknown, the Lord did not bless Cain. Cain became angry and rose up and smote his brother. This, according to orthodox Christianity, was the first murder ever committed. The Lord was unhappy, called Cain and asked him - "Why did you kill your brother?" Cain answered- "Am I my brother's keeper?"

This raises a very important issue. Why should we be, at all, unselfish? Why should we help others, even at the cost of suffering a loss to ourselves? Vedānta answers such questions through its concept of rebirth. However, philosophies or theologies, which do not accept the hypothesis of rebirth, cannot provide satisfactory answers. Let us examine this in a little more detail.

Let us assume for the sake of argument, that the good Lord has bestowed on us only one life. We are born on a certain day, we live for a certain period and one day we leave this world. We do not know why we are born, we do not know how long we have to live and we do not know what happens to us after death. Life appears to be a pure accident, with no rhyme or reason. We live as if we are condemned prisoners, waiting for the day of judgement and execution. We snatch at every opportunity to be happy, even if it be at the cost of others. We develop a feeling that the whole universe is meant for our happiness and enjoyment. We do not accept life after death and we start believing that everything vanishes after death.

This kind of materialistic philosophy is of ancient origin and existed in India, even before Western Civilization came into existence. It was called Cārvāka Philosophy. It is not clearly known how the word Cārvāka originated. It could be the name of a philosopher or as is more generally accepted, it could be a combination of two words: 'caru' meaning pleasant and 'vāk' meaning word. The central tenet of this philosophy is expressed in the form of a śloka

यावज्जीवेत् सुखं जीवेत् ऋणं कृत्वा घृतं पिबेत् ।  
भस्मीभूतस्य देहस्य पुनरागमनं कुतः॥

(“Let us live happily as long as we are alive. What happens after death is not known, because no dead person has ever come back to tell us about it. Once the body dies and is burned to ashes, will it ever come back?”)

The Cārvāka philosophy has been accepted as a system in Indian thought, though its tenets have not been accepted. However, it makes an interesting study, because of its tongue-in-the-cheek remarks. For example, if you think that if by tying an animal to the sacrificial pillar and sacrificing it to gods, you will be sending it to Heaven, why should you not tie your own grandfather instead and send him to Heaven? This philosophy says that the Vedas are meaningless, self-contradictory and are of no use to anybody. It is very difficult to refute such arguments, so long as we believe that this is the only life we have and there is no rebirth.

The modern version of this philosophy says that mind is a product of matter. Mind is born with the body and dies with the body. All thoughts, which arise in our mind, are purely chemical reactions and do not leave any permanent mark behind. Hence, there is nothing like memory that survives death. Emotions and feelings have no reality of their own, but are only chemical processes in the brain.

If mind is born with matter, what is the relationship between mind and brain? This is what has been bothering neuro-scientists for quite sometime. What happens to the brain after the body dies? Does it retain any memory of actions, thoughts and feelings? Neuro-scientists are of the opinion that all these questions can be answered by a proper study of the chemistry of the brain. Whether they will be successful or not, only time can tell.

For people, who keep an open mind and are keen observers, life indeed appears to be a paradox or a mystery. Human life abounds in many inexplicable phenomena, for which a simplistic explanation is not at all possible. Consider, for example, the phenomenon of mental retardation. When a child is born with a syndrome, whose fault is it? Is it the fault of the parents or that of the child? Certain theologies try to explain this by saying that it is the will of God. If we believe that every human being is entitled to only one life, it implies that God is partial. Why should He endow some people with brilliance and make some other people morons? Is this all mere accident? Then, what is the meaning of life? Why should we not end the miserable existence of such unfortunate people through euthanasia? These are important ethical questions,

which arise if we believe in the hypothesis of a single life.

Take the case of geniuses. Where do they get their intuitive capacity from? Is it also only a chemical process? If so, is it possible through cloning to produce geniuses? A striking example of genius that comes to one's mind is that of Mozart. It is said of him that he had mastered playing of piano by the age of five and had become a composer very soon thereafter. He died at the young age of 38 years leaving behind musical compositions, which enthrall listeners even today. This kind of achievement is not possible with mere training, since otherwise everybody would be a Mozart. The intuitive capacity of Śrīnivasa Rāmānujan, the famous mathematician, is again something, which cannot be acquired by any amount of practice. Of course, all these can easily be brushed aside by saying that it was all a random selection phenomenon of genes responsible for the genius. Such a hypothesis would leave behind many more questions than it tries to answer.

Eastern philosophies have the alternative answer in the form of the concept of rebirth. According to this hypothesis, we have all existed in the past through many lives and will have to continue to reappear on this planet to lead many more lives. Every action we

perform in our life leaves behind an impression in the citta or mind stuff, called 'samskāra'. Our citta is a storehouse of all such impressions, accumulated over a vast number of lives we have lived so far. This storehouse is known as Sancita Karma, the word Sancita meaning "accumulated" and the word Karma here meaning "impressions of our actions". When we take birth in the current life, we draw upon part of the impressions stored in the citta. These impressions, called Prārabdha Karma or effective actions, decide the type of birth, the parentage, the environment and surroundings in which we are born and undergo various experiences. As soon as these effective actions have been exhausted, we desert this body and go in search of a fresh body, in which we can exhaust other impressions we have accumulated. Even during the current life, we perform many actions, good, bad or indifferent, whose impressions get lodged, in our citta. These fresh impressions are known as Āgāmi or Kriyamāṇa Karma meaning the impressions of all future actions. They get added to the storehouse of Sancita Karma. Thus, the human being, or the individual self, called in Vedānta the Jivātman, wanders from life to life, until all the Karmas in the storehouse are exhausted.

The Law of Karma is only a restatement of Cause and

Effect. The Bible says, "As thou sowest, so thou reapest". The only difference is that the cause and effect need not be confined to this life alone. As the American expression goes, "There is no free lunch". We have to pay for what we do, whether in this life itself or in a future life.

Vedānta explains the hypothesis of Karma philosophy with an allegory. There is an archer, who is equipped with a bow and a quiver full of arrows. He has just shot an arrow, which is speeding towards its target, probably an animal. The archer has another arrow in his hand, which he has not yet strung on his bow, but which he can if he wants to. In this allegory, the archer represents the individual self, the bow his body and sense organs with which he can perform actions, the quiver with the arrows Sancita Karma, and the arrow in the hand represents Āgāmi Karma and the arrow speeding towards the target the Prārabdha Karma. He has no way of recalling the arrow, which he has already shot. Similarly, we have no say in the consequences of our previous actions, which have already started bearing fruits. The arrow in the hand can either be strung on the bow and shot or thrown away, which is a choice the archer can exercise. The arrows in the quiver, which are the Sancita Karma, may either be used by the archer in the future or thrown away.

Let us examine this allegory a little more closely. The fact that an arrow already shot cannot be recalled implies that we have no control on the events which happen in our life and which are due to our own actions in the past. This is what is known as Destiny or Fate. But, so far as the arrow in the hand is concerned, we have a choice. Similarly, we can exercise a choice on how we react to the events, which happen to us. This is Free Will. Karma philosophy places both Destiny and Free Will in a proper context. It says that our present life is governed by our past actions done in this life itself or in past lives. But, whatever is likely to happen in our future lives can, to a certain extent, be influenced by how we exercise our free will. In simpler words, our present is dictated by our past, but our future is in our hands. Swāmi Vivēkānanda expressed it succinctly: “Man is the maker of his own Destiny.”

What connection does this hypothesis have with Karma Yoga? As mentioned earlier, we have no control over Sancita Karma or Prārabdha Karma. Whatever has happened has to yield its results inevitably. We do not know how much we have already accumulated in the form of Sancita Karma over several lives. We also do not know with what Prārabdha Karmas we have been born in this life. It is only when events happen to us

and appear to be beyond our control that we realize that there are other forces at work, which we call Destiny or Fate, not realizing that we are only paying for our past actions. However, we are not just a plaything in the hands of Destiny or Fate. We do have a choice in relation to future actions. It is this Free Will given to us which gives us a choice as to how we respond to situations. And it is this choice which is at the very core of Karma Yoga.

Whenever any event happens to us, therefore, we have to exercise our free will in reacting to the event. Since we cannot influence the event in any way, we have to learn to accept it. Our reaction to the event should work on us in a positive way, so that we evolve spiritually. We can illustrate this with a simple example. All of us, at sometime or other in our lives have experienced difficulties in connection with travel. We make full preparations in good faith to set out on a journey, but come to know that the flight or the train departure has been delayed. It is very difficult for us to know precisely why the delay has occurred. It is invariably due to a concomitance of several factors resulting ultimately in the delay. We know very well that there is nothing we can do about it. So, what should be our reaction? Should we fret and fume, lose our temper, pick up fights with people connected or unconnected

with the delay and thus do harm to ourselves? Or, should we utilize the time of waiting for a useful purpose? The choice is ours. Getting worked up at the delay may harm our health and well-being. But, accepting it as something inevitable, we can keep calm and cool in our reaction, thus contributing to our physical and mental welfare. This is what Karma Yoga tells us to do.

Thus, it is seen that our entire life and activities will undergo a sea change if we accept Karma philosophy. It helps us look at life in an objective way and prepares us to face the challenges of life boldly.

Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism accept this philosophy in toto. This is reflected in the attitude to life exhibited by the practitioners of these religions. The Semitic religions, on the other hand, appear to reject this philosophy. But, is that really so? The Kabala sect of Judaism believes in the concept of rebirth. Early Christianity believed in this philosophy, until it was declared anathema during the time of Emperor Constantine. The Sufi sect of Islam firmly believes in this concept. Parapsychologists of modern times have been experimenting with many of their patients, by resorting to past life regression studies, leading to startling revelations. However, the most fascinating

evidence for rebirth has come from the United States of America, which is considered by most people as one of the most materialistic countries of the world. This is the story of Edgar Cayce, known popularly as the Sleeping Prophet and the Seer-Out-Of-Season. This is the subject of our next chapter.

**Chapter - 4****THE STORY OF EDGAR CAYCE**

Edgar Cayce was born on the 18th of March 1877, in a farmhouse near the town of Hopkinsville, Kentucky, in the United States of America. He was a normal child with a loving temperament, except for a tendency to claim that he saw visions. This was not taken seriously by his parents, who thought they were mere childish pranks. As a student in the local school, he was quite average, but was distinguished for his sweet temperament. In the year 1890, when he was 13 years old, he had a remarkable experience. One night, not being able to sleep properly because of the softness of the pillow, he used one of his textbooks as an additional pillow. Next morning when he woke up, he was surprised to notice that he remembered practically the entire text of the book. This continued for a couple of years. Needless to say, he became a good student and was highly successful in his studies.

In the year 1892, he was playing baseball with his friends in the backyard of his house, when the ball struck him on the temple. He lost consciousness. When he came back to his senses, he realized that he had lost the mysterious capacity he had demonstrated of

memorizing books he had used as pillows. Naturally his studies were affected and his grades came plummeting down. He left school and decided to take up jobs for earning money. He changed jobs quite often, until he met a girl from a rich family, called Gertrude Evans, in 1897. They fell in love with each other and decided to get married. Edgar was now desperate to get a steady job, so that he could support his wife comfortably. He became an assistant in a bookstore and became very popular because of his knowledge of books.

The bookstore job was quite decent, but did not fetch him much money. Hence, he became a travelling insurance salesman in 1900, a job at which he proved to be quite efficient because of his charming personality. But very soon tragedy struck. Towards the end of 1900, he developed throat pain, which turned to laryngitis. When he recovered from the disease, he realized that he had lost his voice. Obviously, he could not continue as a travelling insurance salesman. This prompted him to look for a job in which he did not have to exercise his vocal cords and so took up a job as a photographer's assistant.

During March 1901, there was a visitor to Hopkinsville, by name Hart, who was an itinerant

hypnotist. He held several shows during his stay in the town, in one of which he mesmerized Edgar and was able to make him talk in that state. However, this was no consolation for Edgar because when he was back in the normal state, he still had his disability and was still unable to talk. Hart left the town after a few days because of other engagements. Meanwhile, a local amateur hypnotist, called Layne, belonging to the same town, took up this task. However much Layne tried to help Edgar talk through hypnosis, he was not successful.

The 31st of March 1901 marks a very important date in the life of Edgar. Layne had hypnotized him on that day and was asking him several questions. During this process, Layne was coughing and appeared to be in ill health. Suddenly, Edgar's voice rang out loudly and clearly, describing in medical terms the complaint Layne was suffering from and the remedy for that complaint. The words used by Edgar were highly technical and could be understood only by a medical practitioner. One must remember at this stage that Edgar was a school dropout. Layne was amazed and asked Edgar, when he came back to consciousness, how he could give such a medical diagnosis. Edgar simply shook his head, indicating that he knew nothing.

When Layne applied the remedy suggested, he recovered fast.

A thought then occurred to Layne that if Edgar is able in a state of hypnosis to diagnose his i.e. Layne's problem, he should be able to diagnose his own problem in the same hypnotic state. So, one day Layne asked Edgar in the hypnotic state as to what exactly is the reason why he had lost his voice. Edgar replied that due to laryngitis blood supply had been cut off to a particular small gland in the throat, causing the loss of speech. If, however, one would massage the chest until it became red, indicating that the blood supply had been restored, he should be able to talk. Here again, the language used was that of a medical professional. The remedy was then promptly applied and when Edgar came to his senses, he had recovered his voice.

This was sensational news indeed. Newspaper correspondents and medical doctors from Louisville, the capital of Kentucky, descended in a flock on Hopkinsville, to see this new wonder, a man who talks like a doctor under hypnosis. With this notoriety, Edgar soon became a famous person. As such, the obstacles to his marriage were removed. He and Gertrude got married on the 17th of June 1903.

Hearing of this extraordinary phenomenon, many sick

people started approaching Edgar for cures and remedies. Along with Layne he worked out a method of going into the hypnotic state to diagnose these sicknesses and to give necessary remedies. A stage was reached when he could hypnotize himself without anybody's assistance. There was also no longer any need for people to approach him personally. A letter was adequate, giving the name, address and the nature of the complaint. He would be read this letter when he was under hypnosis and this would be enough for him to come out with the diagnosis and cure. Hundreds of people were benefited this way.

The fame earned by Edgar had also a negative fall-out. He got enticed by several people to reveal in his hypnotic state the outcome of future horse races. He was also trapped into oil prospecting. While all these, no doubt, made Edgar richer, it affected his health and he started fumbling and making many mistakes in his predictions. It was the warning of Gertrude that finally saved him. He then decided that he had no business to use this God-given gift for such money-making ventures and resolved to confine himself to medical diagnosis, charging only his expenses.

His first son Hugh Lynn was born in 1907. On the 9th of October 1910, the New York Times carried a full-

length article on Edgar. In 1911, Gertrude suddenly fell sick, and was diagnosed to be suffering from Tuberculosis. Edgar was shattered. He was advised by his friends to take recourse to his own power of medical diagnosis to suggest a cure for his wife's complaint. Edgar followed the advice and Gertrude was saved.

In 1913, Edgar shifted with his family to Selma, Alabama, where he set up a photographic business. The following year, his seven-year-old son was involved in a serious injury, the cure for which was suggested by Edgar himself. All these gave him confidence that he was indeed the recipient of a gift from God. He started helping hundreds of people who would correspond with him about their problems. His wife helped in taking down notes of Edgar's remedies.

Life continued in this vein till September 1923. On the 10th of that month, a young lady, by name Gladys, joined him as secretary, and stayed with him throughout his life. It was she who was responsible for taking down detailed dictations of Edgar's voluminous statements made during his hypnotic states.

In the month of October 1923, Edgar had a visitor from Dayton, Ohio, by name Arthur Lammers, who was in

the book trade. Lammers came to visit Edgar out of curiosity and not because he had any specific complaints. He could stay only for a short time and had to return to Dayton to take care of his business. He invited Edgar to come with him to Dayton as a guest for a few weeks, during which time they could continue their discussions about Edgar and his unusual gift.

Arthur Lammers was basically interested in clairvoyance related to horoscopes. He once asked Edgar whether Edgar could prepare a horoscope for him in the hypnotic state. Edgar complied and described the horoscope of Arthur in brief telegraphic words and sentences. Almost at the end, in a very dry unemotional voice, he said, "he was once a monk". These words electrified Arthur, because he understood their significance. When Edgar came back to consciousness, he found Arthur highly excited. When Edgar was told the reason, he was horrified. This smacked of blasphemy, because it referred to rebirth, which as a devout Christian he did not subscribe to. Arthur, however, was able to convince him that there were a couple of places in the Bible, which implicitly refer to rebirth or reincarnation, even though these specific words themselves have not been used. Edgar

was convinced and thus started his so-called "Life-readings"

This raises a very important question about whether Christianity accepts this philosophy or not. Early Christianity did, as we know from the works of Thomas Origen, Justin Martyr, St Jerome, Clemens Alexandrinus, Plotinus and many others. It is said that it was only at the time of Emperor Constantine, who embraced Christianity, that the concept of rebirth or reincarnation was declared anathema.

There are about 3000 cases read out by Edgar dealing with rebirth as available in his archives. These have been the subject of intense study by many scholars during the past decades.

Edgar shifted to Virginia Beach in 1925, where he established the Association for Research and Enlightenment. This Association is the repository of all the records connected with Edgar Cayce. The well-known writer Thomas Sugrue wrote his biography even when he was alive, in 1943.

Edgar died a peaceful death on the 3rd of January 1945, followed by his wife on the 1st of April the same year. He has left behind about 30,000 case histories dealing with about 18,000 people. Of these, at least 3000 refer to rebirth. Edgar's life has been the inspiration for a

good number of Parapsychologists in the United States, England and India to take up past life regression as a research topic.

The story of Edgar Cayce clearly demonstrates that life is a continuous process from one birth to the next and that the law of Karma governs this process. It is against this background that one has to study the concept of Karma yoga as enunciated by Śrī Kṛṣṇa in the Gītā.

**Chapter - 5****THE ESSENCE OF KARMA YOGA**

There are innumerable ślokas in the Gītā, which refer to Karma Yoga. But, the best known and most important of them is the 47th śloka of the 2nd chapter,

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन ।

मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूः मा ते सङ्गोस्त्वकर्मणि ॥

[BG 2-47]

(“You have a right to perform actions, but you have no claim on the fruits, do not become the cause of the attachment to fruits. Do not also shun activity.”)

This śloka has been interpreted in several ways depending upon the context. It makes four statements. We have only the right to perform actions. Śrī Kṛṣṇa is being rather generous here giving us the right to act. He later says in the third chapter that no human being can survive without performing actions. In this sense actions are inevitable and should be performed.

In the second statement, he says that we have no claim on the fruits of our actions. This sounds rather strange. If there is no motivation in the form of a result, why should we in the first instance engage ourselves in actions? This is the question, which is often asked.

What do I get out of any action I perform? Why should I engage in activity if I have no claim on the results?

A proper answer to these questions demands a closer look at the meaning of this śloka. In the 18th chapter, Kṛṣṇa makes the following statements:

अधिष्ठानं तथा कर्ता करणं च पृथग्विधम् ।  
विविधाश्च पृथक्चेष्टा दैवं चैवात्र पञ्चमम् ॥

[BG 18-14]

("Five things are needed for the completion of any action. They are the physical body, the vitality, the sense organs and the motivation to act. But, the last and the most important of these is Destiny/ Fate.") We have already looked at what Destiny or Fate is in an earlier chapter. It is quite well known that the human body is the only means for performing actions whose results accrue to us. It is said in the scriptures that since animals and plants behave instinctually, they are not responsible for their actions. On the other hand, the individual souls inhabiting an animal or a plant body use these only to burn away past karmas. It is only the human being with choice that can create fresh Karmas for self.

By itself, a human body cannot act without a life force in it. A dead body cannot do any Karma except

probably decay. Therefore, vitality is essential for the body to act. Even this cannot guarantee the completion of any action, because there are many unfortunate beings in a state of coma, who possess a physical body and vitality but cannot work. What is required in addition is the mind associated with the ten organs. The organs of knowledge motivate the mind to act and this in turn motivates the organs of action. Thus, the four elements namely the body, the vitality, the sense organs and the motivation appear to fulfill the requirements for the completion of any action.

But, *Srī Kṛṣṇa* says no. Where is the assurance that we will always be successful in completing our actions even though the above four elements are present? We come across innumerable instances in our life when, in spite of everything, we are not successful. Equally numerous are instances where with minimal effort we gain maximum success. Therefore, there must be some intangible factor beyond these four, which plays a role. This is what *Kṛṣṇa* refers to as “*Daiva*” or *Destiny* or *Fate*.

The fifth factor is nothing but *Prārabdha Karma*. The result of any action depends upon whether we have merited it through our actions in this or a previous life. It is that which decides whether we are successful in any venture.

The human tendency is mostly to take credit when we are successful, but to look for a scapegoat when we are unsuccessful. This is illustrated by a beautiful story of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa. Once upon a time, there lived a brāhmaṇa on this earth in a village. He had a hut of his own with a patch of garden around it. The brāhmaṇa had cultivated the garden with great care and had planted many fruit bearing trees and flower bearing shrubs. One day an old emaciated cow wandered into the garden and started eating up some of the shrubs. Seeing this, the brāhmaṇa took a stick to scare away the cow. He beat the cow a couple of times to drive it away. His intention was not to harm the animal. But, unfortunately for him, the poor cow collapsed and died.

This was indeed a heinous crime. A cow being killed by a brāhmaṇa was too serious a crime not to be noticed by Yama, the Lord of Death. Yama sent one of his emissaries to fetch the brāhmaṇa, so that he may be punished. The brāhmaṇa, on seeing the emissaries of Yama, got jitters and asked him why he was there. He replied that he had been asked by Lord Yama to arrest the brāhmaṇa and to produce him in Yama's court for being sentenced.

The brāhmaṇa was very clever. He had read a large number of scriptures and knew that each limb of the

human body is associated with a Divine Being. The hand is associated with Indra. So, the brāhmaṇa argued- “What is dead? A cow. What killed it? A stick. Where was the stick? In the hand. So, the hand killed the cow. Who is the Divine being associated with the hand? Indra. Therefore, Indra killed the cow.” He then told the emissary to go and arrest Indra. The emissary, not endowed with much intelligence, went to Indra and requested him to come to Lord Yama. Indra was surprised and asked the reason why. The emissary replied - “ Sir, do you see the cow lying dead on the earth? Yama told us that it had been killed by the brāhmaṇa standing there and we were asked to arrest him. However, he argues that he did not kill the cow but his hand did. Since, you are the Lord of the hand, the brāhmaṇa told us that you killed the cow. Therefore, we have come to arrest you.”

Indra felt that there is no point in arguing with this person. He asked him to wait and came to the hut of the brāhmaṇa in the form of an old man. He entered the garden and went on admiring the trees, the shrubs, and the bushes. On seeing this, the brāhmaṇa came to him and asked him if he could be of any assistance. The old man asked the brāhmaṇa as to whose garden it is. The brāhmaṇa replied- “It is mine.” The old man then admired a flowering tree and asked the brāhmaṇa

who had planted it. The brāhmaṇa replied- “I”; for everything the old man asked him, the reply of the brāhmaṇa was “I, I, I.” At last they came to see the cow which was lying dead on the ground. The old man asked in a sorrowing voice- “Poor thing! Who killed this cow?” The brāhmaṇa was silent. Indra revealed himself and told the Brāhmaṇa- “ You have taken credit for everything good you have done. Why is it that when you have done something wrong, you want others to take the blame?”

This is the human predicament. We are always happy to claim success forgetting others at that time but when we fail, we start looking for scapegoats. Śrī Kṛṣṇa’s admonition to us is - “ If you want to claim credit for all the good deeds you do, you should be prepared to take the blame for all the wrong things also.” He, however, through his Karma Yoga, gives us a choice. Why should we take the credit or the blame for any actions we do? Why should we not withdraw ourselves at the end of our actions and simply accept the fact that we have done our duty? This is the meaning of the second sentence of the 47th śloka of the second chapter, namely do not claim for yourself the results of your actions.

This is, however very difficult to practice in real life. So, there is an alternative way of looking at it.

We, as human beings live a social life. We interact with fellow human beings everyday. Whatever we do or want to do is influenced by what others are doing. In other words, as the English poet John Donne said- "There are many factors tangible and intangible which influence the results of our actions". Let us take a particular example. We once had an opportunity to talk to a young student who had just completed his pre-university examination very successfully and had joined a good Bachelor's course. We suggested to him that we would play a game. We asked him to make a list of all people who had helped him to complete his studies successfully. He first remembered his mother, who had cooked for him and showered upon him a lot of love. He thanked his father, who had financed his studies and helped him by buying the necessary books. He thanked his brothers and sisters, who cooperated with him during his studies, especially at the time of examinations. He thanked the family doctor for taking good care of his health. He was grateful to his classmates for the congenial environment in the college, which made his studies easier. He thanked the teachers for the effort they put in in teaching him. He then remembered the writers and publishers of textbooks, which helped him in the preparation for examinations. He was also grateful to the driver of the

bus, which used to take him to college everyday and bring him back home. He then paused for a while and said – “Where is the end to this list? There are so many people seen and unseen, but for whom I would not have successfully completed my examinations.” How, then, can the student claim exclusive credit for his success? Is it not our duty at such moments of success to share the credit with the innumerable number of people who made it possible? This is precisely what Śrī Kṛṣṇa is talking about.

The third sentence in the śloka tells us that we should not get attached to the fruits of our actions. This is more easily said than done, because there is an intervening factor that is very difficult to get rid of, namely our ego. Let us take an example. Somebody is in need of help and we render it with sincerity and in good faith. We tell ourselves that we are in the least bothered whether the person thanks us or not. If the person thanks us we are naturally happy. But sometimes if we do not receive any thanks, we feel hurt. Our ego then tells us - “Look, how much you have done for this person! How ungrateful he is! He did not even have the courtesy to thank you!”

How can one get rid of this ego? There is a very simple method. Many years ago, when one of us was in need

of help, a family came forward to offer help and assistance. He was in no condition to repay this help either in cash or in kind. He thanked the family profusely and told them that he does not know how to repay them, except with gratitude. The head of the family then made a very interesting statement—"There is no need for you to thank us. However, do not forget what we have done. Keep it in the back of your mind. I am sure there will be many occasions in your life when you have to help someone in trouble. At that time, give them all help and assistance and remember us."

This is a remarkable piece of advice. If someone renders us help, we should never forget to thank him or her. But, it should not stop with that. Otherwise, it becomes quid pro quo. If we remember our helper with gratitude and emulate him by helping others, at the same time transferring the thanks from the one that we helped to the one who had helped us, we will be completely eliminating our ego. In this process, there are only two people who remain, the one who helped us and the one whom we helped. We vanish along with our ego.

There is even a higher way of getting rid of this ego. It is by developing an attitude of service to whatever we do in our life, an attitude recommended by Śrī

Rāmakṛṣṇa to his favorite disciple Swāmi Vivēkānanda. Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa was living in the Kali temple at Dakṣineśwar and Swāmi Vivēkānanda was a frequent visitor. One day somebody asked Thākur about the basic tenets of Qualified Non-dualism of Rāmānuja. Thakur replied that all devotees of Nārāyaṇa are Vaiṣṇavas. There is no caste distinction among them. Every Vaiṣṇava has to look upon other Vaiṣṇavas as Nārāyaṇa Himself and help them whenever there is a need. While saying this, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa went into samādhi. He remained in that state for a few minutes and then returned to a semi-conscious state. He then exclaimed-“ You insignificant creature of a human being! How dare you say you will help others! You can only serve others by seeing Śiva in them.” Very few people assembled there gave any attention to Thākur’s words. Swāmi Vivēkānanda, however, remarked-“ What a wonderful message we have received today! Serving human beings by seeing Śiva in them! One day, I am going to broadcast this message around the world.” It is this message which forms the foundation of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa Mission, established on 1<sup>st</sup> of May 1897.

It is thus seen that the famous śloka of the Gītā mentioned above has so many ramifications and interpretations. A proper understanding of this śloka is absolutely essential to the practice of Karma Yoga.

## *Chapter - 6*

### **KARMA, AKARMA AND VIKARMA**

We have seen earlier the various categories into which our actions can be classified. Śrī Kṛṣṇa introduces in the fourth chapter of the Gītā yet another classification, namely, Karma, Akarma and Vikarma. Of these, Karma has been dealt with in detail earlier. Vikarma usually means 'forbidden action'. However, Vinoba Bhave, in his prison lectures in Yerawada jail, interprets Vikarma as Viśēṣa Karma, meaning 'special actions'. This meaning has not been generally accepted. Whatever it may be, we need to pay more attention to the word Akarma.

Akarma can be translated as either 'inaction' or 'actionlessness'. Inaction implies 'not performing an action'. This is not always possible, because certain actions can never be given up or avoided. As Śrī Kṛṣṇa himself says—"Even the maintenance of the body itself is impossible without performing actions." The other meaning, namely actionlessness, is more interesting. At a first glance, it appears to involve a contradiction. How can Kṛṣṇa tell us that we cannot stop performing actions and in the same breath talk of actionlessness? A closer look reveals to us the real meaning of this word and the secret of Karma Yoga.

Śrī Kṛṣṇa's statement in this context runs as follows-

किं कर्म किमकर्मेति कवयोऽप्यत्र मोहिताः ।  
 तत्ते कर्म प्रवक्ष्यामि यज्ज्ञात्वा मोक्षयसेऽशुभात् ॥  
 कर्मणो ह्यपि बोद्धव्यं बोद्धव्यं च विकर्मणः ।  
 अकर्मणश्च बोद्धव्यं गहना कर्मणो गतिः ॥  
 कर्मण्यकर्म यः पश्येदकर्मणि च कर्म यः ।  
 स बुद्धिमान्मनुष्येषु स युक्तः कृत्स्नकर्मकृत् ॥

[BG 2-47]

‘Even the great sages have been confused about what is Karma and what is Akarma. Therefore, I am now going to reveal to you the nature of Karma, which will help you to lead your life properly, without being troubled by adversities. One should know the nature of Karma. One should also know the nature of Vikarma. Similarly, one should know what is Akarma, because the nature of Karma is indeed very profound. He who sees inaction in action and action in inaction is indeed a wise person, who knows how to live in this world performing all actions.’)

The above statement leads to some confusion in our minds as to what precisely Kṛṣṇa is driving at. Especially the last part of the statement appears to be a paradox and a puzzle. In this connection, we should

recall a very interesting incident from the earliest chapters of the Mahābhārata.

It is said that the great sage Vyāsa composed the entire Mahābhārata in his mind and taught it to his disciple Vaiśampāyana. Seeing this, Brahmā, the Creator, approached Vyāsa and requested him to put the Mahābhārata down in writing, so that many people can benefit by reading it. Vyāsa replied that he would not mind doing it, provided somebody would be prepared to take it down in writing. Brahmā then told Vyāsa to think of Gaṇapati, the elephant-headed god, known for his wisdom, who would be prepared to take down in writing whatever Vyāsa dictated to him. Vyāsa then meditated on Gaṇapati, who promptly appeared before him. The sage narrated to him what had transpired between himself and Brahmā. Gaṇapati agreed to take down the dictation from Vyāsa, since it was the wish of Brahma. But he put a condition. Vyāsa should not hesitate or stumble during the dictation and should not search for words. In other words, the dictation had to be smooth and continuous. Vyāsa agreed, but placed his own condition. He said that Gaṇapati should not put down anything in writing, which he did not comprehend. Gaṇapati agreed.

The Mahābhārata mentions that there are at least 8880

ślokas in the text, which are cryptic and difficult to understand. The śloka quoted above is perhaps one of them.

What exactly is meant by the state of actionlessness? It certainly is not inactivity. Every action we perform must bring in its wake its own results. This is the law of cause and effect. In Karma Yoga, it is our attitude towards the result which is important. It is obvious that every action is commenced with a specific purpose in mind. This is the goal, whereas action itself is the way. An ordinary person is so much engrossed in the goal that the way becomes secondary. Such people sometimes resort to all kinds of strategies, ethical or unethical, to achieve their objectives. A Karma Yogi on the other hand gives more importance to the way than to the goal. He is a believer in the adage-“ Take care of the means, the ends will take care of themselves.” For such a person, the means decide the kind of ends. Results achieved through unethical means appear as tainted. Results achieved, on the other hand, through ethical means appear to him as acceptable, whether they are favorable or adverse. He knows that he has only the freedom to perform the action, i.e., he has control over the means. He realizes that the results are not under his control and hence develops the mental attitude of accepting whatever

follows his action in the form of results. Sometimes, he may go even a step beyond. He may even withdraw his mind completely from the action once it is over. This is referred to as the state of actionlessness.

Let us consider an example. There is a person who is fed up with this world, its trials and tribulations, develops a sense of detachment from all actions, decides to renounce the world and run away to the Himalayas where he can live in peace in a cave, meditating on the Divine. There is nothing wrong in such a desire, provided the renunciation is genuine. If, however, sitting in the cave in the Himalayas, the mind of the person is all the time thinking of the external world, his family and business affairs, his renunciation is only a fake. If his renunciation is genuine he can be considered to be in a state of actionlessness. Otherwise, he is an escapist from his duties and the world.

Should one necessarily renounce the world to reach the state of actionlessness? Śrī Kṛṣṇa says 'no'. One can live in the world, be very active and still exist in a state of mental detachment from whatever one is doing. There are innumerable examples for this. Take the case of Ādi Śankarācārya. Where was the need for him to write so many commentaries, compose so many hymns, travel extensively over the length and the

breadth of the country four times and establish the monasteries named after him? He was already a realized soul. He did it, as Śrī Kṛṣṇa says in the Gītā, for the benefit of humanity. Even though intensely active throughout his life, he had nothing to gain for himself. He lived for the sake of others in a state of actionlessness. Similar is the case of Swāmi Vivēkānanda, who spent the last years of his life propagating the message of his guru and Vedānta, both in India and the West. He never did anything for himself, but lived for others. Such people leave this world with a sense of satisfaction that they have done their duty surrendering the results of their actions to the Divine.

## **Chapter - 7**

# **ROLE OF BHAKTI IN KARMA YOGA**

Karma Yoga teaches us not to get attached to the fruits of our actions. Unfortunately, the human mind is so weak that even with the best of intentions the ego slips in, claiming the results of actions as its own. To overcome this difficulty, Śrī Kṛṣṇa suggests a method. He says-

यत्करोषि यदश्नासि यज्जुहोषि ददासि यत् ।  
यत्तपस्यसि कौन्तेय तत्कुरुष्व मदर्पणम् ॥

[BG 9-27]

(“Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever sacrifices you perform, whatever gifts you give and whatever austerities you practice, do them for My sake, surrendering the results to Me.”) This is how Bhakti or Devotion enters into Karma Yoga.

Devotion demands of us belief in the existence of the Divine. This is a matter of faith. In the life of each one of us, there comes a time when disaster stares us in the face, life appears meaningless and whatever we try to do ends in failure. It is at such times that we really start wondering if there is some external force, which is at play, affecting our life and actions. It is

said that this is the beginning of our quest of the meaning of life. It is also the beginning of our belief in the existence of a higher power. As Shakespeare put it—"There is a divinity that shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will." It is to this Divine that we tend to go for help and succour.

Śrī Kṛṣṇa says in the Gītā that there are four types of people, who approach Him-

चतुर्विधा भजन्ते मां जनाः सुकृतिनोऽर्जन ।  
आर्तो जिज्ञासुरर्थार्थी ज्ञानी च भरतर्षभ ॥

[BG 7-16]

("Four kinds of people approach me. The one in trouble, the one who is curious, the one who wants a favour and the one who knows the Divine.") Most human beings fall either in the first or the third category. It is to such people that Śrī Kṛṣṇa gives the advice to surrender the fruits of their actions to the Divine.

There are two ways in which one can approach the Divine. One can consider oneself as an instrument in the hands of the Divine. Or, one can perform one's actions sincerely and surrender the fruits towards the end to the Divine. The first method is rather difficult for beginners. But, the second one is much easier.

A true devotee of the Divine considers everything in the universe as belonging to God. Whatever actions he performs, he considers the results also as belonging to God. Hence, it is not surprising that he surrenders these results to God so easily. He is in the same state as a servant who is commissioned by his master to perform an undertaking, accomplishes it perfectly and hands over the results to his master. Usually, in all ritualistic activities we undertake, it is a common practice for us to recite a śloka at the end

कायेन वाचा मनसेन्द्रियैर्वा बुद्ध्यात्मना वा प्रकृतेस्वभावात्  
करोमि यद्यद् सकलं परस्मै नारायणायेति समर्पयामि ॥

(“Whatever I have done, O Lord, using my body, my speech, my mind, my intelligence and the sense organs, all of them I surrender at your feet.”)

Why should we do this at all? Why undertake any activity with great enthusiasm, with the intention of achieving an objective, and then suddenly turn around to the other extreme, surrendering the results to the Divine? The answer lies in the fact that we do not know what is good for us. Take the case of King Midas of Greece. He was already a rich person and did not want for anything in life. Nevertheless, he developed a desire to become richer. He did not even bother to think

whether it was really in his best interests to gain more wealth. He went ahead and prayed to the Gods to grant him a boon that whatever he touched should turn into gold. The Gods granted him the wish, probably smiling at his foolishness. Midas then went around his palace like a mad man, touching everything he saw. The entire palace became golden.

This exercise must have made him thirsty. He tried to drink some water, but the moment water touched his lips it became gold. He was hungry and wanted to eat his meal. Again, the moment he touched the foodstuff, it also became gold. Just then his daughter came running to him and hugged him. She also was turned into gold. Midas now realized his stupidity. He prayed to the gods once again, pleading with them to take the boon back.

A child of 5 or 6 years is sick with fever, but starts demanding an ice cream to eat. What should the mother do? After all, a mother is supposed to be an embodiment of love. Should she give the ice cream to the child? Having the best interests of the child at heart, she naturally refuses. The child becomes angry and says—"You are a bad mother. I don't like you" The mother simply smiles, because she knows what is good for the child. When the child recovers from sickness,

the mother is only too happy to feed the child with an ice cream.

All of us are basically petulant children, always making demands on God, not knowing whether they are good for us or not. It is precisely this lack of discrimination, which is referred to in Kathopaniṣad, in the dialogue between Yama and Naciketa. Yama says-

अन्यच्छ्रेयोऽन्यदुतैव प्रेयस्ते उभे नानार्थे पुरुषं सिनीतः।  
तयोः श्रेय आददानस्य साधुर्भवति हीयतेऽर्थाद्य उ प्रेयो  
वृणीते ॥

[Katha 1-2-1]

(“ There are two things in human life, the pleasant and the beneficial. Both of them approach the human being. An ignorant person chooses the pleasant, which makes him happy for a short time, but in the process neglects the beneficial. On the other hand, a wise person chooses the beneficial as against the pleasant, because he knows that he will benefit in the long run.”)

This is the real reason why it is safe for us to develop the attitude of surrendering the fruits of our actions to the Divine. Whatever the Divine gives us back, we should accept as Prasāda or the Divine Grace. A true devotee always feels that the Divine is just and will

never let him down. There is a famous statement in Hindi that in the realm of God, justice may be delayed but never denied.

We will now consider the higher devotional attitude of being an instrument in the hands of the Divine. The best example of this attitude is to be found in the Gītā. At the beginning of the Gītā, Arjuna's attitude to Kṛṣṇa is one of friendship, comradeship and companionship. Gradually, this feeling changes to one of reverence, when Arjuna requests Kṛṣṇa to advise him as to the proper course of action. Kṛṣṇa then becomes the teacher and Arjuna the disciple. In the beginning of the fourth chapter, Kṛṣṇa suddenly reveals his real nature as a Divine who reincarnates from time to time for the benefit of humanity. Arjuna now realizes that the Kṛṣṇa talking to him now is none other than the Divine itself. Devotion enters into his heart and gradually grows, until in the tenth chapter, he requests Kṛṣṇa to tell him how to recognize Divinity in daily life. In answer, Kṛṣṇa talks of his emanations or Vibhūtis through which one can recognize the Divine. Arjuna is now fully convinced of the glory of the Divine, but wants to see the Divine Cosmic form in its entirety. Kṛṣṇa agrees, grants Arjuna the power of the Divine Eye and displays His Cosmic form.

Arjuna sees the Cosmic form with mixed emotions. On one side is the benign form of the Divine, and on the other side there is the terrible form. The initial thrill and happiness gradually give way to a sense of fear, anxiety and terror. He then asks the Divine form-

आख्याहि मे को भवानुग्ररूपो  
 नमोऽस्तु ते देववर प्रसीद ।  
 विज्ञातुमिच्छामि भवन्तमाद्यं  
 न हि प्रजानामि तव प्रवृत्तिम् ॥

[BG 11-31]

(“Who are You with this terrible form? Why have You taken this form? What purpose do You want to achieve? I am terrified. Please take pity on me.”)

Śrī Kṛṣṇa replies-

कालोऽस्मि लोकक्षयकृत्प्रवृद्धो  
 लोकान् समाहर्तुमिह प्रवृत्तः ।  
 ऋतेऽपि त्वां न भविष्यन्ति सर्वे  
 येऽवस्थिताः प्रत्यनीकेषु योधाः ॥

तस्मात्त्वमुत्तिष्ठ यशो लभस्व  
 जित्वा शत्रून् भङ्क्ष्व राज्यं समृद्धम् ।  
 मयैवैते निहताः पूर्वमेव  
 निमित्तमात्रं भव सव्यसाचिन् ॥

[BG 11, 31- 33]

“I am Time the destroyer, come here to destroy these hosts on both sides of the battle. If you are under the delusion that none of these will die if you do not fight, you are mistaken. They have been already finished off by me. I am using you only as a means to do so. Therefore, get up, fight, conquer your enemies and enjoy the kingdom.”) This is, indeed, a very important message we get from the eleventh chapter of the Gītā. A devotee should always consider himself an instrument in the hands of the Divine. None of us is indispensable. The world existed before we were born, it will continue to exist after we leave. Our presence or absence in the world will not make any difference to it. If, in our arrogance, we think we are doing something extraordinary for the world, we are indeed mistaken. The world is not waiting there with bated breath for us to do something for it.

Life is an opportunity for us to improve ourselves. When Śrī Kṛṣṇa says that we are instruments in the hands of the Divine, he is implying that the Divine in Its infinite Grace has given us an opportunity for self-improvement. When we do all our actions with this attitude and at the end surrender the fruits of our actions to the Divine, we should have a sense of satisfaction that we have done our duty to the best of our ability. What greater reward can one hope to get than the

mental satisfaction of having satisfactorily done one's duty?

One of us had an interesting experience in this regard. When he was a post-doctoral fellow in Goettingen in Germany in 1969, he was given an office room in the top floor of the building in the Aerodynamics Research Institute. As is usual in all rectangular office buildings, toilets were located at the end of the corridor. One day, when he went to the toilet, he found a woman cleaning the washbasin. Seeing her busy in her work, he apologized to her and was about to go back. She stopped him and said-“ Please wait, Professor. I want to show you something. See the washbasin. How it is sparkling!” She was after all a humble woman, whose work would be taken for granted by many people. Nevertheless, she had the pride of achievement. The mental satisfaction she derived would probably be a much greater reward than any material benefit she would get out of it. If any action is done efficiently like this for its own sake and the results are surrendered to the Divine, one would truly feel that one has been an efficient instrument in the hands of the Divine.

If we really want to adopt this attitude towards work and surrender the fruits of our labour to the Divine, the fruits should indeed be of the best quality. Let us

take an example. Let us assume that we are arranging a farewell party to a friend in the office. We decide to order for snacks, fruits, flowers etc., for the party. If there are about 50 people in the party and we decide to buy 50 apples, do we go to the market and personally inspect the 50 apples we want to buy? On the other hand, if we have to buy a couple of apples for somebody very close to us, like our own child, would we not exercise great care in choosing the best apples? Why do we make this distinction? In the first case, it is an impersonal affair and there is no personal attachment or involvement. In the second case, somebody very dear to us is involved. If this is the care we exercise in the case of one dear to us, how much more care is needed when we offer the fruits to the dearest of all, namely God Himself. That is the reason why, every action we perform has to be done with a sense of dedication and devotion, yielding the best possible result for surrendering to the Divine.

Is the Divine really in need of our offerings? After all, our concept of God is that He is the creator and sustainer of the whole universe. Is there anything we offer to the Divine, which is not a part of His universe? After all, we get everything from the Divine and whatever we offer already belongs to it. Therefore,

the whole point of this exercise of surrendering the fruits to the Divine is only the elimination of our ego. It is then that our karma is converted into Karma Yoga.

**Chapter - 8****THE CONCEPT OF YAJÑA**

Ever since western scholars discovered the Gītā, there has been an intense discussion among them whether Śrī Kṛṣṇa is a historical figure or just a myth. It has also been debated whether he was an individual character or a collage of several personalities. In the dispatches of Megasthenes, the Greek Ambassador to the Mauryan Empire, to his master Seleucus at Syria, there is a mention of a cult in practice at that time, i.e., the third century BCE, of a person called Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva. In the Chāndōgyōpaniṣad, there is the mention of a Kṛṣṇa, the son of Devaki and a disciple of Ghora Āngirasa, who had given a new interpretation to the Vedic rituals.

Whatever it may be, the Gītā presents before us a Kṛṣṇa, who is a philosopher par excellence. Not only does he appear to be a great exponent of the Vedas and the Upaniṣads, he is also presented as a great synthesizer of ideas. He never rejects anything, but enfolds all ideas in a comprehensive philosophy, giving them a new interpretation. He has given a new meaning to the word Karma, raising it to the status of Niṣkāma Karma. He has taken ideas from Sāṅkhya,

like Puruṣa, Prakṛti and the three Guṇas, amalgamating them into Vedānta, to give them a new meaning. But, his greatest contribution, so far as Karma Yoga is concerned, is a new interpretation of the Vedic ritual called Yajña.

Yajña or Yāga is a Vedic sacrifice, which occupied the attention of the Vedic people for several millennia. Just like all ancient cultures, the Vedic people also established a close personal relationship with natural forces around them, which they called gods. For them, these gods were very real and could be invoked through appropriate mantras or incantations to intervene in human affairs. This becomes evident when one studies the Vedic mantras as involving an intensely personal relationship between human beings and the Divine beings.

There is a mention in the Vedas of a large number of yajñas, of the order of almost eighty. Each yajña was meant to serve a specific purpose. For example, the yajña Putrakāmēṣṭi was performed to get male progeny, Annakāmēṣṭi for a rich harvest, Viśwajit for immense wealth etc. The person who wanted to benefit by the yajña and who footed all the expenses was called the Yajamāna. He used to engage four priests for the conduct of the rituals: Hotṛ, for reciting the Ṛgvedic

hymns, Adhvaryu, for reciting the corresponding Yajurvedic mantras, Udgātr, for singing the Samavedic hymns melodiously, and Brahmā, the supervisor of the entire proceedings, to see that no mistakes were committed during the yajña. There was a belief in those times that if the mantras were chanted wrongly, they would have an adverse effect, called Pratyavāya. There is a story that Tvaṣṭā, an enemy of Indra, performed a yajña to beget a son, who would kill Indra. Unfortunately, the priests made a mistake while chanting, which went unnoticed. Consequently, a son was born to Tvaṣṭā, who instead of killing Indra, was killed by him.

Before the commencement of any yajña, the Yajamāna had to state the specific purpose for which the yajña was being performed. Thus, every yajña had a specific selfish objective. There were also instances, where a counter-yajña was performed to nullify the effects of an earlier yajña.

Śrī Kṛṣṇa was a product of those times. He was aware of the selfish motives, which impelled people to take recourse to these yajñas. He, however, gives a totally different interpretation to these activities. His advice is that one should perform these yajñas not so much for one's own selfish ends, but for the sake of the welfare of others in particular and society in general.

He says -

यज्ञार्थात्कर्मणोऽन्यत्र लोकोऽयं कर्मबन्धनः।  
तदर्थं कर्म कौन्तेय मुक्तसङ्गः समाचर॥

[BG 3 - 9]

(“ Any action done for the benefit of oneself binds us to this world. But, any action done with an attitude of yajña or sacrifice for the sake of others and society liberates us.”)

The Gītā enumerates a whole series of yajñas, which are not to be found in the Vedas. Here are some examples. Helping others with money, not expecting anything in return, is called Dravya Yajña. Leading a simple and austere life is Tapoyajña. Imparting knowledge of the Self to others is Jñāna Yajña. Self-analysis leading to a true knowledge of one's own real nature is Svādhyāyayajña. So much so, that Kṛṣṇa considers even the act of breathing to be a kind of yajña. When the incoming breath, Prāṇa, merges in the outgoing breath, Apāna (Pūraka Prāṇāyama), and when the outgoing breath, Apāna, merges in the incoming breath, Prāṇa (Recaka Prāṇāyama), and when both the incoming and the outgoing breaths, Prāṇa and Apāna, are stilled (Kumbhaka Prāṇāyama), Śrī Kṛṣṇa says that a yogi is performing Prāṇāyamayajña. In the opinion of the Gītā, the least important of these yajñas is

Dravyayajña and the most important is Jñāna yajña. Swāmi Vivēkānanda explains this as follows: if you give money to some needy person, you may at the most help him satisfy his needs for a day or two. But, if you educate him and make him fit to earn his own livelihood, you are helping him in a permanent way for his whole lifetime.

Yajñas, in this way, become the means for personal development, when practiced at an individual level. When the objective of our action is the welfare of our society, we are engaged in yajña at the social level. However, there is even a larger dimension to yajña. It can be practised even at the global level. It is the greatness of Kṛṣṇa in the Gītā, that not only is yajña discussed at the individual and the societal level, but also at the global level.

To understand and appreciate the concept of yajña at the global level according to Gītā, one should have an idea of how exactly life form appeared on this planet. This will be considered in the next chapter.

**Chapter - 9****ECOLOGY OR ECOYOGA**

According to modern Astrophysics, the universe came into existence approximately 16 billion years ago, through the phenomenon called the Big Bang. It is difficult for us to comprehend what exactly this Big Bang represents. One needs a thorough knowledge of advanced physics and mathematics to be able to appreciate the intricacies of the subject. For example, when the astrophysicists say that the Big Bang occurred in 23 dimensions of which 13 dimensions got concealed within a brief instant, it is difficult for us to make a mechanical model of the phenomenon.

When the 10 dimensions are supposed to have got reduced to 4 dimensions, with six dimensions curling in upon themselves, we probably get a better idea of the universe we see around us, thanks to the Theory of Relativity of Einstein and the Gravitational Theory of Newton.

The Solar system is supposed to have been formed about 4.5 billion years ago. The Earth's atmosphere got established soon thereafter and the earliest life forms made their appearance about 1.5 billion years ago.

Evolution then proceeded gradually, giving rise to animal species, invertebrates and later vertebrates. During the Jurassic era, approximately 250 million years ago, huge mammals and reptiles, called Dinosaurs, first made their appearance. They roamed on the surface of the earth till 70 million years ago, a long period of 180 million years. They became extinct around this period for reasons, which will be discussed later.

The next species to make its presence felt on the planet was that of the Apes, the great Apes and finally the Humanoid. During this process of evolution, the great apes gradually shortened their front legs and were able to stand erect, thus giving rise to the earliest specimens of human species. It took quite sometime for these species to develop a brain and thinking capacity until around 100,000 years ago, Homo Sapiens, the thinking human being made its appearance. Fire was discovered which spurred on the growth of civilization. Human settlements came to be established. Around 10,000 BCE, the last Ice Age ended, giving rise to a flood, the theme of several myths in ancient civilizations. This was followed by the Continental Drift, which stabilized around 8000 BCE, giving rise to the great river systems afterwards. The banks of these river systems saw the rise of several civilizations.

Arts, crafts and culture developed in these civilizations, leading to curiosity in the minds of humans about their own origins. Science, as we know it today, came into existence around 2500 BCE in Greece. From this time onwards there has been a continuous record available of the material progress of humanity.

Science led in its turn to Technology around 400 years ago. The progress made by humanity during this technological era is indeed spectacular and unprecedented. But, at the same time, there have been many grumblings. The twentieth century saw an amazing growth of Science and Technology, but also at the same time, two world wars, and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the cold war between the Western powers and the most recent Gulf wars. Defence analysts say that we have enough stockpiles of atomic weapons on the earth to destroy the planet seven times over.

At the same time, we have been exploiting nature's resources in the form of oil and coal at such a rapid rate that the existing reserves may last at the most for another hundred years. It appears as if the extinction of the human race is only a matter of time.

It is worth pondering over the reasons as to how the dinosaurs, the biggest animals known to recorded

history, survived for 180 million years, whereas the humans are facing extinction within a short period of 100,000 years.

Daniel Quinn has provided the answer to this to a certain extent in his bestseller "Ishmael". This book is about a dialogue between a gorilla and a human being, the gorilla being the teacher and the human being the student. The gorilla tells the human being that it divides all creatures into two categories: "the Takers" and "the Leavers". Takers are those who take from others something whether they need it or not. On the other hand, the Leavers are those who take only what they need and leave the rest behind. According to this classification, the gorilla says that human beings are Takers and animals are Leavers. This can be illustrated by an example.

A few decades ago, there was a rash of films from the West about Africa, then known as the Dark Continent. The earliest among them was a film called Serengeti Park. This film was about wild life in Africa and became an instant success. There is a very nice scene from this film. It shows a solitary tree, in whose shade is resting a lion-family- the lion, the lioness and two cubs. The lion and the lioness are dozing, with the two cubs prancing around them. A little distance away there is a herd of gazelles, grazing grass peacefully.

The lioness opens her eyes slowly, yawns once and gets up. The gazelles now start looking at the lioness carefully, with their ears pricked up. The lioness moves a few steps and the gazelles slowly start moving away. All on a sudden, the lioness starts running, chasing the gazelles. They in turn start dashing off in different directions. The lioness targets one of the gazelles, springs upon it and catches hold of its throat. She then drags the carcass to the tree, where the lion family starts feasting. The other gazelles now slowly come back and resume their grazing. They are no longer afraid of the lioness, because they know that she will not kill unnecessarily. This is the law of the jungle. No animal kills for pleasure, but only out of necessity.

On the other hand, we have the example of the human race. No doubt, the race has produced great thinkers, philosophers and apostles of peace. But, it is more notorious for producing a much larger number of tyrants, dictators, power-mongers who take pleasure in killing. The human being has perfected the art of killing to such an extent, that during wars soldiers get decorated for these acts. Killing animals for pleasure has been raised to the level of a sport. This is the basic difference between the human race and the animal kingdom. It is this attitude of taking things whether we need them or not that Mahatma Gandhi

was referring to when he said-“There is plenty in the world for everybody’s need, but hardly enough for one person’s greed.”

Why is this so? After all, the human being claims to be the most evolved of all species, because he is supposed to be endowed with intelligence and discrimination. One cannot expect the same kind of intelligence from animals. Nevertheless, they appear to know better how to live in harmony.

The Bible says that God made man in His own image, thus conferring upon man an exalted position over the rest of the species. This led to the feeling that it is the birthright of human beings to lord over other species, which are meant to serve his ends. This has been extrapolated to include nature also as being the handmaiden of humans. So, the human being talks of the “conquest of nature”. For him, nature is something external and he does not feel a part of it. Therefore, he has absolutely no hesitation in exploiting nature and non-human species for his own advantage.

Has this always been so? A study of ancient cultures reveals to us that it was not so in the earlier periods of human history. At the dawn of civilization, the human being was still a part of nature and lived close to it. He knew of his dependence for everything on nature.

However, with the rise of civilized settlements and because of various inventions and discoveries, the human being started slowly becoming independent of nature. This bred in him a sense of superiority and a feeling that he is the master of nature. But, never in his wildest dreams had the human being ever imagined what awaited him as a consequence of his attitude towards nature.

Wars have been going on in human history for a very long time. They used to be limited to the warriors and soldiers, with the rest of the populace left untouched. However, in recent times, wars have assumed a sinister aspect. They now involve even those, who have nothing to do with the issues at stake, like, women, old people, children, traders etc. A manifestation of this all-inclusive character of modern warfare was witnessed during the twentieth century in the form of the two world wars.

The first indication that something was radically wrong with the human race was the dropping of two atomic bombs in 1945 on the Japanese towns of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, not only wiping them out but also causing irreversible harm in the form of radiation damage. Since then, human life has not been the same. Conflicts have increased, life has become precarious

and uncertain, with the question on everybody's lips -  
“ Is this the beginning of the end?”

Contrast this with the life of dinosaurs on this planet. These animals lived as a species for 180 million years. Some of them were huge in size and their daily intake of food was the equivalent of several dozens of human beings. They also had their own inner fights and conflicts. But, this did not lead to extinction of the race, because their life hardly affected the rest of nature. They knew how to live in harmony with nature and survive. How did they then become extinct?

It is surmised that around 70 million years ago, a huge meteor crashed on to the Yucatan peninsula, raising an enormous dust cloud, which enveloped the earth and blocked the sunlight for about a 100 years. Consequently, plant life became extinct. Animals depending on plant life, i.e., herbivores, died because of lack of food. The carnivores were then deprived of their sustenance and consequently perished one after the other. Thus, for reasons not at all of their making, the dinosaurs perished. What a contrast with the human race, which has been attempting single-mindedly to commit “hara-kiri” after a very short span of only 100,000 years!

The story does not stop here. We also need to look into the irreparable damage done to the environment by the human species. Words like air-pollution, water-pollution and environmental - pollution have become very common. All these have been recognized as the byproducts of the extreme rapidity of scientific and technological progress, demanding more and more of power and generating more and more waste products. The situation has become so abnormal that even the oceans are being considered as possible dumping grounds for toxic waste products of industries. In the mad rush for “progress”, the human being appears to have forgotten the lessons of history. Self-indulgent societies have come and gone in large numbers. The situation today is such that clean air and clean water have become luxuries rather than freely available commodities. As it happens in all such situations, humanity is desperately looking for solutions. The tragedy, however, is that no solutions appear to be in sight, which will not create more problems in their turn. This is the reason why at least a part of humanity has started looking for “ancient solutions for modern problems”.

What is the solution offered by the Gītā? Having introduced the concept of yajña, Śrī Kṛṣṇa says -

यज्ञार्थात्कर्मणोऽन्यत्र लोकोऽयं कर्मबन्धनः ।

तदर्थं कर्म कौन्तेय मुक्तसङ्गः समाचर ॥

सहयज्ञाः प्रजाः सृष्ट्वा पुरोवाच प्रजापतिः ।

अनेन प्रसविष्यध्वमेष वोऽस्तविष्टकामधुक् ॥

देवान्भावयतानेन ते देवा भावयन्तु वः ।

परस्परं भावयन्तः श्रेयः परमवाप्स्यथ ॥

इष्टान्भोगान्हि वो देवा दास्यन्ते यज्ञभाविताः ।

तैर्दत्तानप्रदायैभ्यो यो भुङ्क्ते स्तेन एव सः ॥

यज्ञशिष्टाशिनः सन्तो मुच्यन्ते सर्वकिल्बिषैः ।

भुञ्जते ते त्वघं पापा ये पचन्त्यात्मकारणात् ॥

[BG 3, 9-13]

("At the beginning of Time, the Creator, having created the human species along with the rest of the world, also gave humanity the gift of yajña or mutual cooperation. He then told humanity – 'By this gift of yajña and by its proper use, you shall prosper. Yajña or mutual cooperation will be like the wish-fulfilling cow of plenty (Kāmadhēnu), granting you all your wishes. Nourish the Devas or gods and they shall nourish you in return. Thus, nourishing each other, both of you will prosper. The Devas or gods thus strengthened by you will bless you in return. He, however, who taking so much from the gods, does

not return anything to them is verily a thief. Whoever is responsible for breaking this cycle of mutual cooperation will lead a life, which is of no use to himself or to the rest of humanity”).

This short message of Śrī Kṛṣṇa has wide ramifications. It goes without saying that life on this planet is very complex and is a network of mutual dependence and relationship. Every species has its own place in life, including even the lowest life forms, such as earthworms. Any imbalance in these mutual relationships has wide-ranging implications at all levels. A recognition of this fact makes us a little more sensitive to the needs of the other species. Earlier we mentioned the book “Ishmael” by Daniel Quinn. In that book, the gorilla asks the human being - “Did you ever bother to consult us before tampering with nature?” It is a very relevant question. Human history records that in order to achieve short-term goals, nations have not hesitated to wipe out entire civilizations and cultures. It can be mentioned without fear of contradiction that the woes of the modern era started with a cynical and selfish exploitation of nature and of the fellow human beings for short-term gains. It is the realization of this fact that has given rise in the recent years to global movements, attempting to improve the quality of life on this planet. Śrī Kṛṣṇa

appears to have anticipated most of these developments and provided for a solution in advance.

In the above passage from the *Gītā*, Śrī Kṛṣṇa mentions Devas or gods. Who are these gods? Are they celestial beings living in different worlds, influencing humanity? Most ancient civilizations had such beliefs. The Vedic civilization looked upon the powers of nature as gods and gave them anthropomorphic forms. Greece believed that gods resided in the heavens and interfered with the affairs of human beings. The word Deva in Sanskrit means “the bright one” or the “shining one”. It also means in a broader sense anything, which is life-giving or life sustaining. Early human beings lived so close to nature that they appreciated the value of natural forces, which we in our so-called “civilized” life take for granted. Even though they were in no lack of pure air or water or environment, they did appreciate that these commodities were too precious to be taken for granted. Hence, we see all ancient cultures resorting to worship of nature. The Vedic culture was no exception. When we read the Vedas, the first impression we get is that these hymns were composed to propitiate the natural forces. It is more likely that they were expressions of gratitude to the divine beings that made human life possible and sustained it. Modern man, in his arrogance that he has

mastered nature, takes as evident that pure air, pure water and pure environment will always be available. It is this mistaken impression which has been responsible for modern day disasters like environmental pollution etc.

What sustains human life? The most obvious answer is oxygen. With every breath we inhale, we take in oxygen and with every exhalation we breathe out carbon dioxide. This happens day in and day out voluntarily or involuntarily. It has become so much of a second nature that we hardly notice it, unless we suddenly face a shortage. If a group of people is confined to a room whose windows and doors are closed, it is a matter of experience that the group will develop headache, shortness of breath and may even become unconscious. It is at that time that we realize the role played by air in the sustenance of human life. No wonder, an ancient culture like the Vedic appreciated this point and considered pure air as life giving and life sustaining. For that culture, air became divine and was given the name, Vāyu, worthy of worship.

Similar is the role of water in human life. It is said that the human body itself is 80% water. We know very well how dehydration can set in when we do not

take enough quantity of water daily. We also know how a glass of water can revive people who have been suffering either from dehydration or who have swooned for some reason or other. Here too, the Vedic culture recognized the importance of water in human life and considered it as divine. It came to be called “Varuṇa”, another object worthy of worship.

Human civilization is supposed to have commenced with the discovery of fire. There is no need to emphasize the importance of fire in human existence. An entire science, called Thermodynamics, dealing with this subject has developed around the concept of Heat. Living amidst nature, the Vedic people came to appreciate the multifaceted nature of fire and came to worship it. Fire became the most important segment of a sacrifice and it was considered as the medium through which oblations could be conveyed to other divinities. So, the Vedic people deified fire and called it “Agni”. Even today, no Vedic sacrifice is possible without the medium of Agni. Even human life is dominated by fire in some form or other. Therefore, Agni also is a Deva, which is life sustaining.

In a tropical country like India, monsoon rains are always looked upon as bringing a new life to the whole of nature. Just when the earth is parched, people and

animals are being scorched by the heat, there appears a small patch of a dark cloud in the horizon, which gradually grows and envelops the sky. The wind picks up, a distant sound of thunder is heard and in the midst of the clouds are seen flashes of lightning. There is anticipation all over that it will rain shortly and bring relief from the scorching heat. During such times, peacocks are seen to dance in ecstasy, heralding the approach of rain. It is a marvelous experience for both human beings and animal and plant kingdom that a new life is about to commence. No wonder, the black clouds, the thunder and the lightning came to be associated with a life-giving or life-sustaining experience. The Vedic people identified this phenomenon with a divine being and called it Indra. So much importance was given to this phenomenon that Indra came to be considered the Head of all gods.

It is in this context that Śrī Kṛṣṇa's statement quoted above should be considered. When he says that human beings should cherish gods, it is not only an advice to revere Indra, Agni, Vāyu, Varuṇa etc., but also to create an environment in which these Devas can help humanity sustain itself. Only when this happens can humanity derive benefits from these Devas. Hence, it is the duty of human society to protect Agni, Vāyu and Varuṇa. This simply means that the human, the

animal and the plant species can enjoy good water and good air. This is the mutual cooperation that should exist between the human beings and nature.

It is almost impossible for humanity not to pollute air and water, because, after all, human life does involve a certain amount of waste products to be given back to nature. Nature is a huge thermodynamic engine, which can absorb an enormous amount of garbage fed into it by human beings. It has a capacity to recycle, but the capacity has a limit. It is when this limit is exceeded that nature starts groaning and complaining. If we are not wise enough to hear the groans and the complaints coming from nature, she simply gives up and condemns us to face the consequences. This is the predicament of the human race today. We are indiscriminately overloading nature with garbage beyond her capacity of recycling. Therefore, Śrī Kṛṣṇa uses strong words to show how irresponsible human beings can become.

Where does Karma Yoga fit in this scenario? The recognition of the fact that we as the human race are not above nature, but are a significant part of it, is an essential component of Karma Yoga at the global level. We too have our responsibilities to animal and plant life, as well as to the environment. We derive so much from them. Should we be so selfish as not to recognize this fact? Should it not be our endeavor to find out in

what way we can contribute to the welfare of other forms of life, including the environment? Only when we realize that we have our own cooperative role to play in this web of life will we understand how to live in harmony with nature. What was realized by the dinosaurs by instinct, to make them survive for 180 million years, may have to be learnt by the human race through bitter experience. This is the central message of Śrī Kṛṣṇa's advice and admonition.

We have referred earlier to the attitude of surrendering one's actions with the fruits to the Divine. But, how do we recognize the Divine? Popular imagination seeks the Divine in temples, mosques, churches, images, icons, photographs etc. It hardly occurs to us that we are in the midst of the Divine, which is all around us. There is an interesting anecdote concerning the presence of Divinity everywhere and in all forms: Many years ago, there lived a saint in Kamātaka, in the town of Udupi. His name was Kanakadāsa, which is a household word in South India. He was a great devotee of Kṛṣṇa, composed innumerable songs about him and set them to music. He was born in a family of shepherds and became a great devotee of Kṛṣṇa at a very young age. He came to Udupi from his village to visit the famous Kṛṣṇa temple there. He was not admitted inside the temple because he belonged to a

low caste. It is said that he was very disappointed and went to the back of the temple and composed a song spontaneously, requesting Kṛṣṇa to grant him a vision of the Lord by opening the door. Legend has it that the image of Kṛṣṇa turned on its pedestal backwards and a portion of the wall in front of Kanakadāsa broke, giving him a clear sight of the image. Even today one can see at the back of the temple a break in the wall called "The window of Kanaka". The image in Udupi still faces backward, which cannot be seen in any other temple.

Seeing this extraordinary phenomenon, Vyāsārāya, the pontiff of Udupi Math accepted Kanaka as his disciple. This aroused the jealousy of other disciples, who belonged to the upper caste. They used to grumble at the special favors shown by Vyāsārāya to Kanaka, but could not do anything about it.

One day, they approached Vyāsārāya and asked him what was so extraordinary about Kanaka that the Guru showed him so much consideration. If Kanaka was such a great devotee of Kṛṣṇa, they argued, would he be able to produce Kṛṣṇa before them? Vyāsārāya realized the motivation behind the taunt of these disciples. He asked Kanaka whether he would be able to accept the challenge. Kanaka replied that the Divine

would come to the temple next evening at the time of the evening worship and accept the offerings.

The sensational news spread like wildfire throughout Udupi and the whole town gathered in the temple premises next evening. The ritual worship commenced and the time came for the sacred offering of cooked food. Just at that time, a dog walked in and started eating the food. Vyāsarāya and Kanaka were sitting still and silent. The other disciples became angry at this sacrilege and drove away the dog by beating it with sticks. The worship was soon over. The triumphant disciples then mocked Kanaka and asked him why he was not able to invoke the Divine. They taunted him by saying that his devotion to Kṛṣṇa was only a sham. Vyāsarāya asked Kanaka as to what had happened. Kanaka calmly replied - "The Divine came, but nobody recognised Him. I did not say that the Divine would come in the form of Kṛṣṇa. Divinity is there in everything. What appeared at the time of worship to accept the offering was none other than the Divine." This is indeed a very great lesson we need to learn. Surrendering the fruits of one's action to the Divine does not necessarily mean that we need to visit a temple or any place of worship to do so. A selfless service rendered by seeing the Divine in the recipient is the best and simplest way of Karma Yoga.

After describing the concept of Yajña and its global perspective, Śrī Kṛṣṇa continues-

अन्नाद्भवन्ति भूतानि पर्जन्यादन्नसंभवः ।  
यज्ञाद्भवति पर्जन्यो यज्ञः कर्मसमुद्भवः ॥  
कर्म ब्रह्मोद्भवं विद्धि ब्रह्माक्षरसमुद्भवम् ।  
तस्मात्सर्वगतं ब्रह्म नित्यं यज्ञे प्रतिष्ठितम् ॥  
एवं प्रवर्तितं चक्रं नानुवर्तयतीह यः ।  
अघायुरिन्द्रियारामो मोघं पार्थ स जीवति ॥

[BG 3, 14-16]

("All creatures are born out of food, food is a product of rain. Rain is a consequence of yajña. Yajña is an action mentioned in the Vedas. The Vedas have come out of the mouth of Brahma the creator, who himself has emanated from the Supreme Divine. Therefore, the Supreme Divine being is always established in sacrifice. Whoever goes against this order is a sinful person and leads a useless life."). This statement of Kṛṣṇa also has to be understood in the proper context.

It is an indisputable fact that all life forms have emanated from food or are sustained by food and finally become food for other life forms, as mentioned in Bhṛḡuvalli of Taittirīyōpaniṣad. Food of any kind requires water for its growth, and water is a product of

rains. This is an aspect of the hydrological cycle of life. It is known that 70% of the surface of the earth is covered by water. Due to the heat of the sun, water evaporates from the oceans, the seas, the lakes and even from the earth itself. This evaporated water in the form of water vapour ascends to the sky, cools in the process and forms rain clouds due to the dust nuclei in the atmosphere. The atmospheric wind blows the rain clouds on to landmasses. With the saturation of water vapour reaching the critical point, rains occur. It is a well-known fact of aerodynamics and meteorology that greenery attracts rain. This is the reason why rainfall is plentiful in those places, which have thick vegetation. As we have seen above in the discussion about ecology and environment, wherever there is mutual cooperation between the human beings and nature, the latter prospers. This gets manifested in the form of the preservation of thick forests, which attract rains. It is in this context that one should understand the statement of Śrī Kṛṣṇa that rains are a consequence of yajña or sacrifice. The orthodox or traditional interpretation has been that when sacrifices are done to the gods, they favor us with rains at the proper time. Today, in the context of ecology, one can interpret this statement of Kṛṣṇa by saying that wherever there is a feeling of mutual cooperation and

help, there is bound to be a preservation of ecology, leading to rainfall at the proper time and in the proper place.

These ideas of *yajña* have already been discussed in detail earlier. Hence, there is no necessity to go further into this, except to point out the importance of this kind of life to human welfare. Since all actions of mutual help, done without any selfish motive, are an integral part of Karma Yoga and we know very well that Karma Yoga itself has been enunciated in clear terms by Śrī Kṛṣṇa in the *Gītā*, he has been revered by millions of people for the last several millennia as an incarnation of the Supreme Being. Therefore, the practice of Karma Yoga at the individual, societal or global level is a tribute paid by us to the Divine Being. As Śrī Kṛṣṇa has himself mentioned in the passage quoted above, the very practice of Karma Yoga serves to invoke the presence of the Divine. So, whenever we perform any action with the attitude of Karma Yoga, we are in the presence of the Divine, to whom the results are surrendered.

**Chapter - 10****IS KARMA YOGA ADEQUATE  
FOR SELF-REALIZATION ?**

Right from the time of Ādi Śankara, there has been a debate about the precise role of Karma Yoga in Self-realization. According to Śankara, Karma Yoga cannot lead directly to liberation. The reason given is the following: “Every action is finite in nature. It has a beginning and an end. Hence, the results are also finite. The state of liberation is one of identity with Brahman, Who is infinite. How can anything which is finite lead one to that which is infinite?” From the standpoint of Advaita or Non-dualism, Śankara’s position appears unassailable.

In that case, why should we resort to Karma Yoga at all? The answer given by Śankara, for which he finds support in the Gītā, is that it helps us in the purification of our mind or citta, which is a preliminary step to the realization of one’s own nature as the Atman.

Rāmānuja, on the other hand, feels that Karma Yoga along with Bhakti is the real path to liberation. If Śankara argues in his commentaries that Jñāna and Karma are incompatible, Rāmānuja feels that they should be practiced together. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, in

his popular commentary on the Gītā, Gītārahasya or Karmayogaśāstra, maintains that the central message of the Gītā is Karma Yoga. This is because this book was written by him during his incarceration in Mandalay jail and was addressed primarily to freedom fighters. It is thus obvious that each commentator interprets the role of Karma Yoga from his own perspective. Therefore, it will be educative to see what Śrī Kṛṣṇa himself has to say in this regard.

The last chapter of the Gītā commences with a statement by Arjuna-“ Please tell me the real nature of sannyāsa and tyāga.” Even though superficially both the words mean renunciation, Śrī Kṛṣṇa makes a subtle distinction between the two. He answers by saying –

काम्यानां कर्मणां न्यासं संन्यासं कवयो विदुः ।

सर्वकर्मफलत्यागं प्राहुस्त्यागं विचक्षणाः ॥

त्याज्यं दोषवदित्येके कर्म प्राहुर्मनीषिणः।

यज्ञदानतपः कर्म न त्याज्यमिति चापरे ॥

[BG 18, 2-3]

(“Some sages consider sannyāsa as the total renunciation of all activities based on desires. Some wise people on the other hand declare that tyāga is the renunciation of the fruits of all actions. Some thinkers feel that all actions are evil by nature and hence should

be relinquished. Some others say that not all actions are evil by nature, specially actions like Yajña or sacrifice, Dāna or giving gifts and Tapas or austerity.”)

It is obvious from the above passage that even at the time of Kṛṣṇa controversy raged about the real nature and role of Karma Yoga. The solution provided by Kṛṣṇa is the following-

यज्ञदानतपः कर्म न त्याज्यं कार्यमेव तत् ।

यज्ञो दानं तपश्चैव पावनानि मनीषिणाम् ॥

एतान्यपि तु कर्माणि सङ्गं त्यक्त्वा फलानि च ।

कर्तव्यानीति मे पार्थ निश्चितं मतमुत्तमम् ॥

[BG 18, 5-6]

(“There are three actions which should never be relinquished: yajña, dāna and tapas, because they have the effect of purifying the mind of an individual. Even these actions should be performed without attachment either to the action or to the fruits. Under no circumstances should obligatory actions be renounced, because this will affect the very fabric of society.”)

It is not easy to comprehend how one can perform actions with a sense of detachment from the action itself and its results. Śrī Kṛṣṇa, who declares that renunciation of actions and their fruits is of three types, clarifies this for us. Renunciation because of delusion,

laziness or sloth is Tāmasic and has to be condemned. Renunciation because of fear of bodily pain or because it may cause trouble is Rājasic in nature and will not help the spiritual growth of the individual. But when all obligatory actions are done efficiently and to the best of our ability, with a sense of duty and at the same time not hankering after the results, we are practicing true renunciation, which is considered to be Sāttvic in character.

How does a person endowed with Sāttvic characteristics perform any action? He is neither attached to any agreeable action nor does he hate any disagreeable action. According to Śrī Kṛṣṇa, as we have mentioned earlier, no action is good or bad. It is the way it is done that decides whether it has been good or bad. Not all of us are endowed with the same nature or qualities. Each one of us has some kind of expertise or other. We should recognise this and place this expertise at the disposal of others. There are people who are experts in making beautiful images of gods and goddesses. There are others who know how to decorate them beautifully. There are still others who know how to worship with devotion. There are some that melodiously sing the praise of the Divine in the form of songs or bhajans. There are still others who are expert cooks and prepare delicious dishes as

offerings to the Divine. But, a vast majority, not being capable of any of the above, simply sit, meditate and think of the Divine with feeling. Just because they are not contributing tangibly to the act of worship, are they inferior? They contribute in their own way to create an atmosphere of holiness by their devotion. Similarly, in all other activities we find a situation where people endowed with leadership qualities take initiative to carry out an action. However, there are a much larger number of people who may not have leadership qualities, but know how to obey and carry out orders. They also are needed by society.

Let us illustrate this with a simple example. Take any metropolis. Imagine that all the administrators in the metropolis stop work for 24 hours. On another day, all teachers stop work again for 24 hours. Consider now the situation when the sanitary and cleaning staff down their tools for a day. Which will cause the greatest worry? If the administrative staff do not work, all the files will be unattended to at the most for 24 hours. If the teachers do not work for a day, the students will enjoy a holiday. But imagine the amount of garbage that will pile up if the conservancy staff do not work for a day. Which one of these is most critical from the point of view of the welfare of society? The answer is provided by what happened in Surat, Gujarat

in the year 2000. Therefore, Kṛṣṇa says that for a true Karma Yogi, no action is agreeable or disagreeable. He looks upon all of them with the same eye and does them with equal sincerity. Actions cannot be entirely relinquished by any individual, because actions are inevitable and human life itself will become impossible without actions. Therefore, renunciation according to Kṛṣṇa means the relinquishing of the fruits of actions and not the actions themselves. This in a nutshell is the opinion of Kṛṣṇa as per the Gītā.

How can one view the opinion of Śankara in the light of the above arguments? Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa provides the answer. According to him, as our devotion to the Divine increases and our perception of the Divine becomes deeper, works drop off by themselves. He used to illustrate this with an example. The daughter-in-law in a household is ever active performing various kinds of duties. Suppose she becomes pregnant. The duties performed by her gradually reduce as the stage of her pregnancy advances. Just before delivery, the mother-in-law relieves her of all her duties and responsibilities. After the baby is born, her only task is to look after the baby. Similarly, in the field of spirituality we should never give up actions in the initial stages. But as we progress more and more, actions drop off by themselves until we get completely

absorbed in the Divine. It is the last stage that Śankara is talking about and it is the middle or preliminary stage that Rāmānuja is talking about.

What are the views of Swāmi Vivēkānanda in this respect? According to him, each yoga can take us to the final goal by itself. This statement of Swāmi Vivēkānanda has been interpreted by some scholars to mean that he disagreed with Śankara. This is not really true. Whatever be the yoga we start out with, be it Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Rāja Yoga or Jñāna Yoga, we notice gradually that aspects of other yogas also enter into our practice, until by the time we reach our goal what we would be practicing would be not a particular yoga but what Śrī Aurobindo calls “ the Synthesis of Yoga”. For example, since Karma Yoga is the theme here, let us see what happens to a Karma Yogi as he advances in his practice. Niṣkāma Karma leads to Bhakti Yoga through the renunciation of the fruits of all actions to the Divine. This leads in turn to a gradual absorption in the thoughts about the Divine, leading to concentration and meditation, which is the objective of Rāja Yoga. Finally, the Karma Yogi acquires the true knowledge of the Divine, along with a realization of his own relationship to the Divine, which gradually leads him to Jñāna Yoga. A similar kind of analysis can be applied to the other Yogas also.

What are the kinds of actions that qualify to be considered as leading to Karma Yoga? What are the actions that need to be avoided by a Karma Yogi? This is an important practical aspect of Karma Yoga. According to Śrī Kṛṣṇa, the following actions should be avoided because they are tāmasic in nature: those actions which are undertaken without any kind of thinking, those undertaken without paying any attention to the consequences, whether they lead to loss or injury to oneself or others and those actions commenced without realizing whether we have the necessary capability. There are many people who are so selfish that they would not mind sacrificing the welfare of others so long as they are able to reach their goal. This, unfortunately, has become a bugbear of the consumerist society. We are surrounded by a cacophony of advertisements, shrilly promoting products that may not be any use to us. Blinded by the desire to possess these articles, many people would not mind resorting to unfair means to acquire wealth. Śrī Kṛṣṇa gives a graphic description of the nature of such people, whom he considers to be endowed with demoniacal qualities. He condemns such actions in no uncertain terms, when he says that they will be made to pay for such things either in this life or in any future life. It goes without saying that a Karma Yogi should never indulge in such actions.

**Chapter - 11****IMPORTANCE OF KARMA YOGA**

The Gītā is a comprehensive text of Yoga. Śrī Kṛṣṇa is referred to in the Gītā itself as Yogēśvara or the Lord of the Yogas. The Gītā basically recognizes only two Yogas, Jñāna Yoga and Karma Yoga. Bhakti Yoga and Rāja Yoga are considered as a part of Karma Yoga, because they involve action. Even though all the four Yogas are dealt with in the Gītā, the centre stage appears to be occupied by Karma Yoga and Bhakti Yoga.

Śrī Kṛṣṇa goes to great lengths to describe the nature of Karma Yoga and Karma Yogis. What does he himself think of Karma Yoga and its importance?

In the twelfth chapter, whose main theme is Bhakti Yoga, Śrī Kṛṣṇa refers to Karma Yoga also in four ślokas. In the eighth śloka of this chapter, he tells Arjuna to place his mind and intellect firmly in Him. This way Arjuna will experience the feeling of merging with the Divine. It appears from the succeeding ślokas that Śrī Kṛṣṇa must have noticed an expression of concern on the face of Arjuna as to how he can always fix his mind and intellect in the Divine. Therefore, Śrī Kṛṣṇa tries to cajole Arjuna

into the practice of devotion, which will help him reach the Divine. Apparently, Arjuna is still expressing a doubt on his face as to whether he can practice devotion at all. Śrī Kṛṣṇa then comes down one step lower and tells Arjuna that if he is not able to practice, he should at least perform all actions for the sake of the Divine, because even by doing actions for the sake of the Divine, one can attain perfection. The perplexity on the face of Arjuna appears to persist. Śrī Kṛṣṇa finally says-“ If you are not able to do even this, take refuge in Me and being self-controlled, surrender the fruits of all your actions to Me.”

This is an indication of the high regard Śrī Kṛṣṇa himself has for Karma Yoga. This is more evident from the next śloka where He says-“ Better indeed is knowledge than blind practice. Better than mere knowledge is meditation with knowledge. Even superior to meditation is the renunciation of the fruits of all actions, because this brings immediate peace.”

Not only is this a eulogy of Karma Yoga, it also provides us with a method for self-improvement. Spiritual practice starts basically with Karma Yoga, i.e., actions done with an attitude of yajña. The next step is to surrender the fruits to the Divine. This is followed by an attitude of being an instrument in the hands of the Divine performing all our actions for the

sake of the Divine. This way, we will be constantly thinking of the Divine and ultimately realize and merge in the Divine. This is the path recommended by Śrī Kṛṣṇa for spiritual growth in the Gītā.

*Appendix*

**STORIES ABOUT KARMA YOGA**

It has been mentioned already that the Gītā is the textbook of Karma Yoga. The Gītā and the Mahābhārata have a very interesting relationship. The Mahābhārata is a huge text, containing not only the history of the Kuru dynasty, but also several incidental anecdotes. Almost all these anecdotes are about some aspect of life or other. The Gītā serves as a summary of the messages of these anecdotes.

Similarly, whenever there is any statement in the Gītā, which appears incomprehensible, one can always find a story in the Mahābhārata illustrating the particular teaching of the Gītā.

Take for example, the following statement of the Gītā:

कर्मणैव हि संसिद्धिमास्थिता जनकादयः ।  
लोकसंग्रहमेवापि संपश्यन्कर्तुमर्हसि ॥

[BG 3-20]

(“By action alone, Janaka and others attained perfection.”) and

मां हि पार्थ व्यपाश्रित्य येऽपि स्युः पापयोनयः ।  
स्त्रियो वैश्यास्तथा शूद्रास्तेऽपि यान्ति परां गतिम् ॥

[BG 9-16]

("Taking refuge in Me, they also who might be of inferior birth like women, vaiśyas and sūdras attained to the supreme goal"). We have already seen how much importance Kṛṣṇa has given in the Gītā to the concept of Yajña. But, it is difficult for us to understand how to apply this in everyday life.

If one goes through the text of Mahābhārata, one comes across two stories, the first one from the Vana Parva and the second from the Aśwamedhika Parva, illustrating the above teachings. Swāmi Vivēkānanda has narrated these two stories also in his small book on Karma Yoga. Here, we will be narrating these stories with reference to the context of the Gītā.

In the eighteenth chapter of the Gītā, there are two ślokas, nos. 45 and 46, which refer to the performance of one's own duty—" Devoted each to his own duty, man attains the highest perfection--Worshipping Him with his own duty, a man attains perfection." This is illustrated by a famous story from the Vana Parva. The background of the story is as follows.

The Pāndavas have been exiled to the forest for twelve years, this to be followed by one year of ajñātavāsa, meaning life incognito. They leave for the forest along with Dhaumya, their family priest. Many events happen during this period of exile, which are described

in detail in this Parva, which is the second longest in the book. During the period of exile, wherever the Pāndavas used to go, they would meet great sages from whom they would receive words of advice.

Towards the end of the exile, the Pāndavas were staying in a forest called Kāmyakavana, when Śrī Kṛṣṇa visited them. While the Pāndavas were exchanging notes with Kṛṣṇa and others, the great Ṛṣi Mārkaṇḍeya arrived at the abode of the Pandavas. He was received with great honor by all present, because of his extraordinary spiritual stature. Every day spent by Mārkaṇḍeya with them became for the Pandavas an opportunity to ask questions and to elicit the appropriate answers from the sage.

On one particular day, Yudhiṣṭira, the eldest of the Pandavas, asked Mārkaṇḍeya a difficult question. This related to two categories of people, women and kṣatriyas. The life of an average woman was indeed hard, because the service she renders her family is never-ending. Similarly, the life of kṣatriyas was also harsh, because they had to resort to cruelty in order to carry out their duties. How can such people earn merit, so that they could reach liberation?

One should remember in this context the social position of women at the time of the Mahābhārata. It is quite

likely that women, kṣatriyas, vaiśyas and śūdras had gone out of the main stream of education, which had got restricted to the Brāhmaṇas. When we study the question of Yudhiṣṭira keeping this context in mind, it appears as if he wanted to know what is the means of salvation for such people deprived of formal education, especially women.

The answer given by Mārkaṇḍeya is interesting. He says that there is no need for women to become experts in the scriptures in order to perform sacrifices or yajñas. It is sufficient for them to render faithful and selfless service to their families. Mārkaṇḍeya illustrates this statement with a story.

Once upon a time, there lived a Brāhmaṇa by the name of Kauśika. He was devoted to the Vedas and had studied all the scriptures and was leading a virtuous life of an ascetic. One day he was sitting below a tree reciting the Vedas, when a female crane sitting on top of that tree let its droppings fall on his body. The Brāhmaṇa became very angry at the bird and looked at it with angry glances with the thought of doing an injury to it. The bird fell down to the ground and died. Seeing this, the Brāhmaṇa was moved by pity and began to lament as to what a bad deed he had done moved by anger. At the same time, he had a sense of

pride that he was powerful enough to kill a bird with a mere angry glance.

After some time, feeling hungry, the Brāhmaṇa entered a village and stood in front of a house to ask for alms. He heard a female voice, saying from inside - “ Please wait”. The Brāhmaṇa waited for some time, but the woman did not appear. He was upset and was getting angry. After some time, the woman of the house collected some food as alms and came out of the house to give it to the Brāhmaṇa. He then angrily told her-“ I am surprised at your conduct. Why did you have to make me wait so long?” The woman replied - “ Please forgive me for delaying you. I was serving my husband when you came and you know that for a housewife the husband is God Himself.” The Brāhmaṇa’s anger did not abate with this reasoning, and again, with great anger, he told the woman - “ How can you place your husband above a Brāhmaṇa waiting for alms? When even Indra bows down to them, how can you, a mere human being, disregard a Brāhmaṇa? Are you not aware that the anger of a Brāhmaṇa is like fire and may consume the entire earth?”

The woman replied calmly - “O Brāhmaṇa! I know you are a great ascetic, but please cast off this anger of yours. I am no bird to be burnt by your angry glances.”

The woman then continued with an enumeration of the various qualities supposed to be exhibited by Brāhmaṇas. At the end of this discourse, the woman continued by admonishing Kauśika that he really does not know what is virtue. The only thing he knows of virtue is what he has studied from books. The woman then suggested to him that if he is keen on knowing what virtue really is, he should go to the city of Mithila, where he would find a virtuous butcher, who would be in a position to teach him whatever there is to be known about virtue. The woman then apologized to Kauśika for what she had said, if he thought it was unpalatable. Kauśika, by this time, had been chastened a little and blessed the woman for her advice. He even thanked her for her reproofs that would be of great advantage to him. Having now collected his alms, Kauśika went back to the place where he was staying.

He was so highly impressed by the remarkable lady, that he developed a sense of reverence to her and decided to go to Mithila. Entering the city, he asked for the butcher and was directed to his shop. He found the butcher selling meat to several people and hence decided to wait for him to become free. Even before Kauśika could make a move, the butcher rose from his seat, approached him and said –“ My salutations to you, O Brāhmaṇa! I am aware that the chaste woman

from the neighbouring village has sent you here. I also know for what purpose you have been sent here.” Kauśika was filled with surprise and thought to himself that this is the second miracle he has seen that day.

The butcher then took the Brāhmaṇa to his house and offered him a seat. He also gave him water to wash his feet and face. After some time, Kauśika asked the butcher why he is following such a cruel trade. In answer, the butcher explained to Kauśika about his way of life. Even though he was unfortunate to be born to this kind of profession, he was very careful in sticking to the path of virtue by doing all his works belonging to his station in life with a sense of duty. Then followed a detailed discussion on the path of virtue. Kauśika asked him various questions to which he received satisfactory answers. One of the questions asked by him was as to why the butcher, in spite of his pious nature, resorted to a profession, which is so cruel. The butcher attributes this to the consequence of the past actions done by him in previous lives. There are further questions concerning the origin of the universe, the ways of life of people of various types, the three qualities, viz., Sattva, Rajas and Tamas, and also the nature of Ātman. Hearing this kind of discourse from the butcher, Kauśika was highly impressed and thanked him for his teachings.

This part of the Mahābhārata from the Vana Parva, commencing with chapter 204 and ending with chapter 215, is called Vyādha Gītā or the Song of the Butcher, glorifying the role of Karma Yoga for people who may not be proficient in scriptures, but who have adopted a way of life according to the principles of Karma Yoga.

The second story we wish to narrate is also from the Mahābhārata, but this time from the Āśwamēdhika Parva, dealing with the concept of yajña. Details regarding the performance of Vedic yajñas and their interpretation by Śrī Kṛṣṇa have been discussed already. The Pāndavas successfully won back their kingdom after a terrible war. The cost, however, was enormous. Of the two million people who participated in the war, only ten survived: the five Pāndavas, Śrī Kṛṣṇa and Sātyaki on the side of the Pandavas, and Aśvathāma, Kṛpācarya and Kṛtavarma on the side of the Kauravas. Seeing this carnage, Yudhiṣṭira's heart was heavy with sorrow. He refused to ascend the throne and wanted to retire to the forest. Śrī Kṛṣṇa scolded him and told him that he should take over the reins of the kingdom to restore the rule of Dharma. When Yudhiṣṭira asked Śrī Kṛṣṇa for advice on how to administer the kingdom, the latter took him to Bhiṣma, who was at that time lying on the bed of arrows in the battlefield, awaiting the advent of Uttarāyaṇa. The

advice given by Bhiṣma to Yudhiṣṭira, in answer to the several questions raised, form two major chapters, the Śānti Parva and the Ānuśāsanika Parva. At the end of his discourses, which also contains the famous Viṣṇusahasranāma, Bhiṣma gave up his body with the permission of Śrī Kṛṣṇa.

Yudhiṣṭira was then advised by Śrī Kṛṣṇa to perform Aśvamēdha yajña or the horse sacrifice to atone for the killing of so many people and declare his own right to be considered an emperor. This yajña usually spans one year. A pure white horse, bedecked with a lot of finery, is let loose in the country, followed by a large protecting army. Whoever was not in favor of the yajña would try to capture the horse, but had to fight the army accompanying the horse. Since Arjuna himself was the Commander-in-chief of the army, the horse did not meet with any resistance, until it arrived at the gates of the capital of Maṇipur, where the prince Babhruvāhana, the son of Citrāngada, the queen, captured the horse. A battle ensued between Arjuna and Babhruvāhana, which would have almost resulted in the death of Arjuna, but for the intervention of Citrāngada. It was then that Arjuna recognised in Babhruvāhana his own blood. This is one of the most popular incidents in the Mahābhārata.

Arjuna returned triumphantly to Hastinapura with a lot of wealth, with which king Yudhiṣṭira performed the yajña in a magnificent manner. There was no end to the vast number of gifts given away to the Brāhmaṇas. It was a great festival and was talked about by many people even several years later.

At the end of the yajña a most wonderful incident happened. When all the Brāhmaṇas and other guests had been gratified with gifts and they were showering blessings on Yudhiṣṭira, a blue-eyed mongoose, with one side of its body changed into gold, came there and rolled itself on the ashes. Looking at itself, the mongoose said in a human voice that this great sacrifice was not equal even to a small handful of powdered barley given away by a brāhmaṇa of Kurukṣetra. The Brāhmaṇas in the assembly became curious and asked the mongoose why it was dissatisfied with this yajña? After all it was one of the greatest ever performed.

The mongoose replied that the sacrifice performed by the brāhmaṇa of Kurukṣetra was so great that it became the cause of his attaining heaven with his wife, son and his daughter-in-law. Not only that: as a consequence its own body had been partly transformed into gold.

The mongoose continued narrating the story of how it

had happened. There lived, once upon a time, a brāhmaṇa in the Holy Land of Kurukṣetra, with his wife, son and daughter-in-law. They were poor people, but virtuous. On one occasion, there occurred a dreadful famine in that kingdom. Whatever little stock of food the brāhmaṇa had stored became exhausted soon. The members of the family were very much afflicted with hunger, but could do nothing except starve. One day, after a long time, he found a few handfuls of barley, which he brought home and gave to his wife. She pounded that into a powder and prepared a dish with the flour, which she distributed equally among the four. They said their prayers and were about to start eating, when an unexpected guest arrived. The family welcomed him and noticed that he too was starving. The brāhmaṇa gave his share of the food to the guest as an offering, which however was not adequate to appease his hunger. Seeing this, the wife also gave up her own share to the guest. The brāhmaṇa was happy even though he knew how much his wife needed the food. Nevertheless, the guest ate up that portion also, but still felt that his hunger was not appeased.

The son then offered his own share to the guest, which the brāhmaṇa passed on to him. Still, the hunger of the guest was not sated. Lastly, the daughter-in-law

offered her own share to the guest through her father-in-law. The guest ate up the last bit of food left and declared that he was satisfied. He blessed them and took his leave.

Thus, the brāhmaṇa and his family discharged their duty sincerely as true Karma Yogis, for the welfare of a guest. But, in this process, they succumbed to the intense hunger they were suffering from and died the same night one by one. They shed their mortal coils, but attained liberation as a consequence of their selfless activity.

The mongoose, which was a silent witness to the supreme sacrifice of the family, narrated what happened next. It decided to pay its last respects to the great souls, who would rather give up their lives than their duty. While it was going towards them, it slipped on a little bit of the barley flour, which had fallen on the ground. That part of its body, which came in touch with the flour, became golden in color. Since that time, the mongoose said, it had been going around looking for another sacrifice of the same greatness, which would turn the rest of the body also into gold. But, it had not been successful. Hearing about the glory of the sacrifice being performed by Yudhiṣṭira, it had come there with great hopes. But, the mongoose

continued- “ Even this sacrifice of the Pandavas is not equal to the supreme sacrifice of the family of the Brāhmaṇa”.

The moral of the story is that our scriptures consider an unexpected guest or atithi as God Himself. No doubt, the brāhmaṇa and his family had been starving for quite some days. Even the food prepared that day would not have been adequate to satisfy their hunger. But, at least it would have helped them to survive for a few more days. Still, the need of the guest was greater and was placed higher. This is what Śrī Kṛṣṇa meant when he said that any action which helps others should be considered as yajña, not only those which are performed ritualistically. The action of the family of the Brāhmaṇa, which helped only one starving guest, was a far superior yajña than the elaborate act of the Pandavas, which might have fed thousands of people. It is only such selfless actions, done with a sense of duty towards the welfare of others and not with a selfish reason, which led to liberation, which, after all, is the goal of all Yogas, including Karma Yoga.

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## Transliteration Codes with Diacritical Symbols

अ	= ȧ	ड	= ḍa
आ	= ā	ढ	= ḍha
इ	= i	ण	= ṇa
ई	= ī	त	= ta
उ	= u	थ	= tha
ऊ	= ū	द	= da
ऋ	= ṛ	ध	= dha
ए	= e	न	= na
ऐ	= ai	प	= pa
ओ	= o	फ	= pha
औ	= au, ou	ब	= ba
अं	= ṁ	भ	= bha
अः	= ḥ	म	= ma
क	= ka	य	= ya
ख	= kha	र	= ra
ग	= ga	ल	= la
घ	= gha	व	= va
ङ	= ṅa	श	= śa
च	= ca	ष	= ṣa
छ	= cha	स	= sa
ज	= ja	ह	= ha
झ	= jha	क्ष	= kṣa
ञ	= ña	त्र	= tra
ट	= ṭa	ज्ञ	= jña
ठ	= ṭha		

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