

KNOWLEDGE AND ACTION

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Abstract

The third chapter of Bhagavad Gita opens with this question of Arjuna, "If in your opinion, O Janardana, knowledge is superior to action, why then, O Kesava, do you engage me in this terrible action?" If knowledge is superior to action, if knowledge alone is going to deliver the goods as far as attainment of tireyas or the limitless is concerned, why are you asking me to perform action? And the action, I am asked to perform, is not an ordinary action; it is a terrible action, the action in the battlefield involving a great deal of destruction and suffering.

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There are reasons why such a question should arise in the mind of Arjuna. Lord Krsna unfolded the nature of *atma* or the Self in such verses as, "He who knows the Self which is indestructible, changeless, without birth and free from modifications; how is such a person to slay or cause another to slay?" (B.G. 11-21). The Self is free from any modification; it is free from the limitations of time and space. It is *akarta* or actionless; it neither performs action nor does it cause anyone to perform it. The knower of the Self is indeed the self and so the wise man also does not perform action in spite of appearing to perform it. Action is not denied here; it is *ihc kartrtva* or the doership that is denied. Actions are performed by the body and the wise man is not identified with the body; he knows himself to be the actionless Self. So the knowledge of the action less self is freedom from action.

Further, in answer to Arjuna's question as to who a wise man is, the Lord said that the wise man is the one who has given up all the desires and who is satisfied in the Self alone by the Self. (B.G. 11-55). He is happy for no reason because the Self is happiness. The description of the wise-man was summed up by this statement, "The wise, is the one who has abandoned all the desires and is free from any longing". (B.G. 11-71). This is generally understood to mean that the one who wants *sreyas* or the limitless happiness must give up all the desires. And action cannot be undertaken without a desire. So performance of *karma* means entertaining desires and hence one can never hope to be a wise man as long as one has to perform actions.

But Arjuna had been told, "You have *thacihikdr* or choice in performing action". (B.G. 11-47). Although this is a statement that applies to everyone in general, the undertone is that it specifically applies to Arjuna. Arjuna took it to be an instruction that he was fit for action alone, that the Lord was asking him to perform action. Arjuna understands that knowledge releases one from bondage while action binds. Action brings in its wake the result which becomes the seed for another action. Thus one gets trapped in the chain of action-result-action. So Arjuna is naturally confused, "With these seemingly

contradictory words, you are, O Lord, as though confusing me. Please tell me one thing by which I can attain *sreyas*". (B.G. III-2). Arjuna does not accuse the Lord of confusing him; he rather admits his own inability to understand the purpose of what the Lord wanted to convey. "O Lord, you are praising one thing viz., knowledge and asking me to do another thing viz., performance of action. Please decide and tell me the one thing that would be the best means for *sreyas*".

The reason why Arjuna asks for one of the two is that the two viz., knowledge and action, cannot be simultaneously pursued by one person. Pursuit of knowledge is the discovery of the Self that is *akarta* and so involves the renunciation of the sense of doership. Pursuit of action, on the other hand involves the sense of doership and so the two pursuits are opposite in nature and are meant for two different *adhikaries* or seekers. One would also think that since the two pursuits are opposite in nature-one involves *nivrtti* or disengagement and the other involves *pravrtti* or engagement they would yield different results. Action gives rise to result which becomes the seed for a new action and thus the cycle of action-reaction-action would be perpetuated. Knowledge on the other hand, is associated with *sannyasa*, or renunciation and it would make one free from action. Therefore Arjuna seems to say, "Please ascertain my qualification and keeping in mind the fact that I want only the *sreyas*, please tell me the one thing".

Although Arjuna asks for advice, the Lord teaches him about the nature of action and renunciation, because the student must understand the whole scheme and act according to his or her own understanding. The teacher teaches and the student must decide the course of action based on his or her own understanding. And so the Lord answers

Lokesmin dvidha nistha pura prokta mayanagha jnanayogena sahkhyanaih karmayogena yoginam

"In the beginning of the creation, since one of the two-fold commitment was given by Me in this world; the pursuit of knowledge for the *ksatriyas* or the contemplative ones and the pursuit of action for the *yogis* or the active ones".

Nistha means a committed life-style. Two types of life-styles were told by Me in the Vedas for two types of people. For the *yogis* meaning the active ones or the householders, is the life of action performed with the attitude of *yoga*. For the contemplative ones or the *sannyasis* is the life of pursuit of knowledge.

The Contemplative Life

For the *sannyasi*, knowledge alone is the means and nothing else. *Sannyasa* taken for the pursuit of knowledge is called *vividisa sannyasa* (*vividisa*-desire to know until the knowledge takes place). Just because the person is a *sannyasi* in terms of an order, does not mean he has knowledge. He does not have the knowledge as long as he has the notion, "I am the doer". In this case, *sannyasa* means *kanna-sannyasa* or the renunciation of action.

It is the life-style accepted by the society and sanctioned by the *sruti* or the Vedas. It is an order, an *asrama* and therefore it is at par with other *asramas* such as *grhastha*, *vcinaprastha*, etc.

The *sannyasi* commits himself to knowledge and he is not interested in anything else such as comfort, security, etc. He just wants to pursue knowledge to gain liberation. A person with such a commitment can take *sannyasa*; he can renounce action. There is a provision in our society for *such* a person. He is not obliged to the family, nor is he obliged to the society. He has been released from the obligation by the family, society, etc.. The society supports him. Here, there is a commitment and the commitment makes the person. Here is a person who is saintly. The very colour of the cloth of a *sannyasi* is the colour of the flame. Flame means light. Light means knowledge. He commits himself to the pursuit of knowledge to the exclusion of everything else. That is why, when a *sannyasi* is received, the following *mantra* is usually chanted:

net karmana na prajayA dhanena lyagenaike amrtatvamanasul

"Not by action, nor by progeny, nor by wealth but by renunciation, some (*maheilnias*) reached immortality".

So *sannyasa* really means the renunciation the three types of desires commonly entertained by a man. One is the desire for wealth and security. Another is the desire for progeny, family, etc.. And the third is the desire for *loka* or the other world which can be fulfilled by performance of certain rituals, specified by the Vedas. It is by the renunciation of these three types of desires that one is ready to pursue the knowledge of the Self that is immortality.

Knowledge is the only means to liberation or freedom, because bondage is false and liberation is an accomplished fact. If bondage were real, you cannot do anything about it. What is real, will never come to extinguish itself and what is unreal, does not have a real existence. If the bondage were real, there is no way of release from it, nor would it be a problem because a real thing cannot create a problem. If the bondage is something in between, i.e. neither real nor unreal, it must be purely due to ignorance and error and so knowledge settles the issue. That is what Lord Krsna says in the GIta and that is in conformity with the *sruti* which says, "That Thou Art", you already are that which you are seeking. So there is no choice in knowledge. So *tyagena*, by renunciation, really means by knowledge. But knowledge is possible only if the mind is free from all other desires.

Commitment to knowledge means *svadhyaya*, learning and *pravacana*, teaching. These are not really two things; they are one only. You pursue knowledge for your own sake and later on if someone approaches you and seeks to know what it is all about, you can teach. This is the contemplative life.

The Active Life

Suppose a person is not ready for the contemplative life - contemplative life is not easy because you cannot become contemplative by will. It is by disposition that you are contemplative. You cannot command a contemplative mind because it is not a matter of will. It is a matter of a certain maturity, a certain disposition and you don't have a choice. You cannot choose to be a contemplative person; you can desire to be one and that is a healthy desire. Everyone has to discover a contemplative mind which in fact is to release the mind from the hold of likes and dislikes. Every mind is held by likes and dislikes, whether you like it or not. The mind cannot be contemplative when either the likes or the dislikes are not fulfilled. What you want should happen and what you do not want should not happen. But the destiny always has a knack of providing what you do not want and of holding back what you want. It is not possible for you to change your likes such that you like all that you get and dislike all that you do not get. Then you have no likes and dislikes; you already are a *sadhu* and ready to become a *sannyasi*. But you do have likes and dislikes and what you do not want comes to you and what you want does not. So there is one thing to be done by you and that is to adopt a means by which the mind is released from the hold of likes and dislikes so that it becomes contemplative.

The question is only with respect to the lifestyle. Are you going to burn all your boats, become a *sannyasi* and pursue the knowledge exclusively or are you going to pursue knowledge along with what you are doing now? Therefore *lokesinin dvidhd nisthd*: there are two life-styles in the pursuit of freedom, or liberation. The entire Veda expounds these two types of life-styles. The Isa-Vasya Upanisad, in the very first *mantra* says, "All this, whatever exists in the world, must be covered by the Lord. Protect (the knowledge) through renunciation of the three desires. Do not covet anybody's wealth". Whatever there is, is nothing but the Lord. Remove the superimposition of the apparent quality and appreciate the Lord who is the self of all beings. This is the truth to be discovered by enquiry - which will be effective only if the mind is free from the desires of wealth, comfort, progeny, etc. This *mantra* is meant for the *sannyasi*.

The second *mantra* is meant for a *karmayogi*. It says, "By performing *karma* indeed should one desire to live for hundred years. For an individual such as you (who wants to live thus) there is no other way than this whereby *karma* may not bind you". Desire to live for a hundred years includes other desires also. If one has the three-fold desires of wealth, progeny and the other world, one should seek to satisfy them by performing *karma*. And by *karma* is meant *vilutakarma* or the actions enjoined by the scriptures.

The Vedas reveal a system of *karma* based on the person's station in life (*asrama*) and his disposition (*varna*). The Vedas stand for the knowledge that has come along with the creation. From the words that are revealed in the Vedas, we can see that the knowledge cannot come from anybody other than the Lord who has created this world. And so we follow the rules for our own good.

Man is endowed with the faculty of choice. When choice is available, direction should also be available. So the Vedas provide the direction in the form of *vilutakarma* or enjoined actions which are also called duty. Duty is usually what one is expected to do; it is born out of a maturity, an appreciation of one's role in the scheme of things. It is a mandate until it is understood. Since man has a faculty of choice, he can disturb the order of the nature. Other beings such as plants and animals cannot do that because they have no volition and so there is always a harmony or a balance in their life. All that a man has to do is not to disturb the harmony that is already there. This is indicated by prohibited actions or *nisiddhakarma*.

The purpose of *vihitakarma* or duty is to make the man appreciate the Lord, to make him alive to the cosmos. In performing duty, one is conforming to the pattern and harmony of creation. Duties are meant to make the man appreciate the pattern of creation, cultivate a proper attitude towards life. When the mind becomes clear, one is able to see the order. In the beginning, duty is in the form of an attitude but finally, it becomes natural, it culminates into a *nistha*.

Nistha does not mean a path. It means commitment. You live a way of life that is called *nistha*. *Karmayoga* is a *nistha*, it is a life committed not merely to performing action but a life committed to performing action as the *yoga*. What makes *karma* a *yoga*? *Yogah karmsu kausalam* in performing action, the attitude of *yoga* or duty is the skill. Action performed with the attitude of duty becomes *yoga*. While performing the action, you do what is to be done, whether you like it or not. Action is performed as enjoined and so the individual likes and dislikes do not come into play. Your likes and dislikes might prompt you to perform an action which is not proper. You refrain from performing it because it is not proper. So performing *vilutakarma* and avoiding *nisitlclliakarma* becomes *karmayoga*.

There is another definition of *karmayoga*: *samatvam yoga ucyate*: sameness of mind (towards success and failure) is called *yoga*. This is the definition of *yoga* with respect to the *result* of action. It *calls* for attitude of sameness towards the result. When a result is looked upon as success, attachment arises and when looked upon as failure aversion arises. In fact, there is no such thing as success and failure. Every result is in accordance with the laws of action. Laws are not made by me: they are made by the Lord and so they can never go wrong. Every result is a right result and there is no such thing as success or failure. The more you appreciate the laws, the more you are in harmony with the things around and you can find your place in the scheme of things.

Action can never fail us: it only produce; result. A given expectation may be said to have failed but I have not failed. That I have failed o that the action has failed, is a wrong conclusion. Only the expectation has been wrong. So nobody has failed. It is only a matter of wrong judgement because man is not omniscient and so he cannot have the knowledge of all the factors that shape the results of the actions. We must remember that we have the freedom in choosing and performing an action and whatever result comes, is in accordance

with the laws governing the action. This altitude of taking the result as it is, that is, maintaining equanimity of the mind both in success and failure is *yoga*.

Action can produce likes and dislikes only if the result is looked upon as a success or as a failure. When the result is looked upon as a function of the invariable laws of action, or what is even better, if it is looked upon as the *prasada* or the grace of the Lord, no new likes and dislikes are created. The existing likes and dislikes will no doubt create desires and produce actions, but new likes and dislikes are avoided. With this attitude towards the result, the action which is born of likes and dislikes becomes the means of eliminating the very likes and dislikes. The mind becomes free from the agitations of elation and depression. Such a mind is tranquil. It is a contemplative mind.

Is Bhakti a Separate Path?

Now some say there are four paths: (i) *jndnayoga* or the path of knowledge for the intellectual, (ii) *bhaktiyoga* or the path of devotion for the emotional, (iii) *karmayoga* or the path of action for the active or the extrovert one, and (iv) *hatha-yoga* or the path involving physical restraint for the one who does not specifically fall in the first three categories.

Of these, the *jnanayoga* and the *karmayoga* are clear. A *jnanayogi* or a *sannyasi* is the one who is committed to knowledge and who has no other obligation. A *karmayogi* is the one who performs actions enjoined upon him in the spirit of duty. He is the one who bears the brunt; he is the one who supports the people in the rest of the *dsramas* including the *sannyasi*.

Then what about *bhaktiyoga*? Does a *bhakta* or a devotee perform actions or not? *Bhakti* is not really a thing. You cannot say, "I want to do *bhakti*". You can do something with *bhakti* or devotion. Lord Krsna says in the Bhagavad Gita, "Whoever offers Me with devotion (*Bhaktyd*) a flower, a fruit or water " Offering is an action to be performed with *bhakti*. There is no such thing as doing *bhakti*. You can offer prostrations with devotion, and then it is all right, but otherwise it only amounts to an exercise.

According to Vedic tradition, every seeker is a *bhakta* or a devotee. It is not that an *abhakt* or a nondevotee becomes a *sannyasi* or a *karmayogi*.

A *bhakta* alone takes *sannyasa* or performs actions. *Bhaktiyoga* is not a separate path. *Bhakti* is the attitude that goes with the performance of action or with the pursuit of knowledge and that alone makes them *yogas*.

Similarly, *hathayoga* is not a separate *yoga* or path. There is such a thing as exercise or *asanas* and everyone can perform them. A *sannyasi* can do *asanas*; he can include *asanas* in his personal daily discipline if he requires them. A *karinayogi* can also perform exercises. So *hathayoga* is not a separate path. There is only one path with two modes of commitments: *lokesmin dvididha nisthd*.

Why Not Become a *Sannyasi*?

Then a question naturally arises, "Why should I not become a *sannyasi*?" This is what Arjuna asked Lord Krsna, "O Lord, you are praising *sannyasa* or renunciation of action and again praising *yoga* or performance of the action. Please tell me decisively which of the two is better". (B.G. V-1). Arjuna means to say that he does not know what he should do: whether he should perform action or renounce it. The Lord replies, "He who sees *sankhya* (*sannyasa*) and *yoga* as one, really sees". (B.G. V-5).

Now *karma binds but karmayoga* does not bind. *Karmayoga* gives you a contemplative *mind which helps* you gain knowledge. So a *karmayogf* also studies the scriptures. Arjuna himself was not a *sannydsi* and so if a *sannydsi* alone is supposed to learn the scriptures, why *should* the Lord teach Arjuna the seventeen chapters of Gila? And what the Lord teaches is no different from what is *taught* in the Upanisads. The Lord teaches the entire *brahmavidya* to Arjuna and that would not have been *taught* had *Arjuna* not been fit to listen to it. Therefore knowledge is open to all. The *question* is how much of it will enter into you; how *much* you will understand. And that makes a lot of difference. And so it is said, "One must list to the scriptures after renunciation". One should be able to leave everything and then *listen* to the scriptures.

But suppose you leave your wife and *chlldr* and also *your* loans and go' to Rishikesh with a *ticket*: That is not *sannydsa*. You do not get benefit of *sannydsa* because you continue to th *about your* home. You think of the child that be *crying* and the tinned, is difficult to accomplish without the discipline of *yoga*". (B.G. V-6). The Lord does not say that *sannyasa* is impossible but He says it is difficult without the *yoga*.

Let us say you want a flower because you want to offer one to Swamiji. You go to the garden, find a bud on a plant and ask the bud to blossom right away. You may take the bud and try to open it by your fingers. It may open because of force, but there would be no fragrance. It requires time for the bud to blossom into a fragrant flower. Similarly, it takes time for the mind to blossom into *sannyasa*. When a person is ready, everything is beautiful; *sannyasa* is beautiful.

Then there may arise a question, "Swamiji, how do I know whether I am ready for *sannyasa* or not?" You are not ready because otherwise this question would not remain. Always give yourself a benefit of doubt that you may not be ready. That is always good. While cooking the food, you sometimes keep the pot on the stove for a little longer than necessary just to make sure that it is cooked. It does not matter if it is a little overcooked, but if the food is under-cooked, it can create problems in the stomach. You don't lose anything by remaining a *kannayogi* because the culmination of everything is in *sannyasa*.

Yoga is a Means to *Sannyasa*

There is *tyaga* or renunciation in *karmayoga* also. There is renunciation of *karmaphala* or the fruit of action which is in fact the renunciation of likes and dislikes

pertaining to *karmaphala*. In *vividisa sannyasa*, there is a renunciation of *karma*. *Flm\ly*, there is the renunciation of *karirlva* or the sense of doership which is by the knowledge of the Self that is *akarld* or non-doer by nature. You cannot give up doership because the one who decides to give up the doership is the doer of the action of giving up the action. The fact is the Se is free from action. You should know this. This matter of knowing and that is called *vidv sannyasa* or the *sannyasa* characterised by know edge. *This the sannyasa* in the real sense a so a *sannyasT* has also to become a *sannyasi*

A *karmayogi* gains that mind and there becomes a *sannyasi*. Even if he does not become a *sannyasi* in terms of an *oviicr*, he can become a *sannyasi* in knowledge. And that is in order is Lord Krsna's contention in the whole of Gita.

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