

**The concept of duty** or *kartavya* is one of the unique contributions of the Vedas. The word dharma also has the meaning of *svadharmānuṣṭhānam* (स्वधर्मानुष्ठानम्) or duty. Duty is an obligation, something that has to be done. The sense of obligation is inevitable in one's life as one is constantly receiving favors from the rest of the world. That one is able to function in this world is founded upon the many favors. In the Vedic vision, a householder's life is looked upon as the process of returning the favors. The Taittirīya Saṃhitā declares that as born one is a three-fold debtor.<sup>1</sup> One is indebted to the *devatās* or gods who are the presiding deities of the mind and sense organs, and by whose grace the body-mind-sense complex functions such that, one can walk, talk and do so many things. One is indebted to one's parents and ancestors for giving the body, for the judicious upbringing and so forth. One is indebted to the teachers and sages who have given the enormous fund of knowledge from which one is freely able to draw from. Of course, one is indebted to other members of the society, such as, a farmer, a milkman and so on for what they do in order that one's life is sustained relatively easy. In fact, one is indebted to every sentient and insentient entity in the universe, which directly or indirectly contributes to one's life. The beauty of all this is that most of the times, without asking, the creation is providing for one's sustenance. The sun gives light and energy; the earth gives food and water; and so on and so forth. The recognition of this fact brings about a sense of gratitude, which in turn, brings about a sensitivity and motivation in one to return that favor. From this interdependent relationship between the individual and the rest of the creation, arises the sense of duty to contribute. *Kartavya*, or duty, really emanates from the spirit of contribution.

The sense of duty percolates in relationships as well. As a son or daughter, one is duty-bound to one's parents and do things for them without expecting any reward, simply with the recognition of what the parents have done for them. The same principle applies to other relationships as well. If everyone performs his/her duties diligently, then everyone's needs are also taken care of. Swami Dayananda Saraswati says that if the husband performs his duty towards his wife, then her rights are automatically taken care of, and vice versa. Duty is automatically *niṣkāma* karma, action performed without the expectation of a reward. It is a right action that is to be done with the right attitude, in the spirit of returning the favor without demanding any reward. A duty-bound person is by definition a karma *yogī*.

Duty is like returning a loan in installments. This recognition of being helped and helping in

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<sup>1</sup> jāyamāno vai brāhmaṇāstribhirṇavān jāyate brahmacaryeṇa ṛṣibhyo yajñeṇa devebhyaḥ prajāyā pitṛbhyaḥ | जायमानो वै ब्राह्मणास्त्रिभिर्ऋणवान् जायते ब्रह्मचर्येण ऋषिभ्यो यज्ञेन देवेभ्यः प्रजया पितृभ्यः | Taittirīya Saṃhitā 6.3.10

return, automatically takes place by design for the rest of the universe other than the human beings. Other sentient things are programmed such that the return of favor takes place automatically, and there is harmony. When it comes to the human being who enjoys the free will, and hence has the freedom of choice, 'to do,' 'not to do,' and 'how to do,' the situation is muddled. In every situation, a human being can do what is right, or can do what is not right, or does not do at all. A human being can misuse or abuse the freewill, and disturb the harmony in the creation. Other creatures, not endowed with the freewill, cannot cause damage either to themselves or to the universe. There will be perfect ecological balance. There will be no global warming, for example. Whatever problems there are in the universe, are the result of abuse of the human freedom, with the human beings not recognizing the role of duty. It requires a sensitivity to recognize, that the world is not designed for one's gratification, and that one must not extract the most from the universe for one's happiness. In the Vedic vision, the universe is looked upon as a place of worship, and accordingly, one's life becomes a life of duty rather than a life of exploitation, and of consumption. Therefore, the idea of contribution is automatically built in the vision of duty.

The usual human tendency is to avoid any strain or stress and give up all the exertions. "Taking it easy," would be the normal tendency. However, duty requires that one cannot take it easy, and one has to do what is to be done. When the sense of duty is stacked against one's likes and aversions, *rāga-dveṣas*, then the struggle comes, especially when the two are contraposed. One's own inner enemies such as, desire, anger, greed, pride, delusion, and jealousy, can come in the way of performing the duty, doing what is right. The inner enemies often rule the roost. The *rāga-dveṣas* very often go against the spirit of harmony. The habitual choice of aligning with one's likes and aversions, jeopardizes the sense of duty. One does not realize that one is a slave to one's own impulses. There is the distorted thinking, that to act according to one's impulse is freedom, whereas to restrain it is bondage. Vedas negate this thinking and boldly proclaim that to follow the impulses is in fact, bondage, and to contain them is freedom. Thus, the concept of duty, as envisioned by the Vedas, is the remedy to free oneself from the hold of the inner enemies.

Lord Kṛṣṇa reiterates the Vedic vision by emphasizing *kartavya* and instructing us to perform karma with the attitude of yoga.<sup>2</sup> Karma yoga helps to neutralize one's *rāga-dveṣas* inherited from the past, so that one attains relative freedom from their hold. One who has the relative freedom, gains the

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2 tasmādasaktaḥ satataṁ kāryaṁ karma samācara | तस्मादसक्तः सततं कार्यं कर्म समाचर ।  
asakto hyācarankarma paramāpnoti pūruṣaḥ || असक्तो ह्याचरन्कर्म परमाप्नोति पूरुषः ॥ B.G. C3, v.19

absolute freedom, *mokṣa*. Karma yoga, that is performing karma with the right attitude, is a brilliant insight offered by Bhagavad Gītā. What is the right attitude? It is simply that one does not want any reward from performing the karma, and that one considers an opportunity to perform the karma in order to be a contributor, to return the favor for the benefits one received. These attitudes make karma a yoga. It does not matter what the karma is. In performing the duty, one's likes and dislikes are relegated, compared to the needs of the one who is served by the duty. In a society if everyone is duty conscious, then, there is reciprocity, in the sense that everyone's needs are taken care of. Among people who are interconnected by roles, a father's duty towards his children is to take care of their needs and similarly, the children's duty towards the father is to take care of the latter's needs. The duty-right equation cannot be one sided. Thus, Lord Kṛṣṇa emphasizes the importance of karma, that is, performing duty with the right attitude. In this sense, a life of duty consciousness is living a life of yoga.

Lord Kṛṣṇa asserts that karma done with the attitude of yoga can become the means of *mokṣa*.<sup>2</sup> First, it brings about a transformation in the mind. The mind becomes sātvik. Second, in such a mind arises the desire for knowledge. When this happens, then karma has done its job.[1] There is a choice for this person to give up the duties or continue to perform duties. Whatever be the choice, the person pursues knowledge.

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\* This posting is inspired by, and is based on, the classes taught by Pūjya Swami Viditatmananda Saraswati on May 19, 2019 at Saylorsburg, PA.

[1] kṛṣṇayajurvedīyataittirīyasamhitā, sayanācārya bhāṣyakāropodghātaḥ कृष्णयजुर्वेदीयतैत्तिरीयसंहिता सयणाचार्य भाष्यकारोपोद्धातः (Introduction to the Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda Bhāṣyam by Sāyanācārya.

na kevalam nityanaimittikābhyāmānuṣaṅgikasvargaprāptiḥ kiṃ tu dhīśuddhayā vividiṣotpādanadvārā

brahmajñānahetutvamapi tayorasti | tathā ca vājasaneyinaḥ samāmananti tametaṃ vedānuvacanena brāhmaṇā

vividiṣanti yajñena dānena tapasā'nāśakena iti |

न केवलं नित्यनैमित्तिकाभ्यामानुषङ्गिकस्वर्गप्राप्तिः किं तु धीशुद्धया विविदिषोत्पादनद्वारा ब्रह्मज्ञानहेतुत्वमपि तयोरस्ति । तथा च वाजसनेयिनः समामनन्ति तमेतं वेदानुवचनेन ब्राह्मणा विविदिषन्ति यज्ञेन दानेन तपसाऽनाशकेन इति ।

By performing the nitya-naimittika karmas (obligatory duties) one gets the svarga phala although it is not mentioned specifically. In addition, the karmas serve as the means for brahma-jñānam by giving the purity of the mind and the desire for Self-knowledge. This is stressed by the ones belonging to the Vājasaneyi Śākhā. The brāhmaṇas seek to know It (*ātmā*) through the study of Vedas, sacrifices, charity and austerity. (Brahadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, 4.4.22.)