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Selfless Labour Is Karma Yoga

By PARMARTHI RAINA

WHY do we work? We work for our livelihood, to provide for our family and contribute to society. Often, we wonder what the real purpose of human life is. Vedic scriptures tell us that it is *moksha*, or liberation from the cycle of birth and death. The *Bhagavad Gita* recommends four yogas — karma (action or work), raja (meditation), jnana (knowledge) and bhakti (devotion) — as paths to achieve this goal. Of these, karma yoga is the most practical.

The Gita says that if we do our *svadharma*, duty, correctly and as per the four *varnas*, which are *brahmana*, *kshatriya*, *vaishya* and *shudra*, we can attain perfection. The classification of the *varnas*, applicable to all mankind, is based on an individual's nature and character, which in turn is believed to be formed by the three *gunas* of *prakriti* or modes of material nature. However, with the passage of time, the *varnashrama* system was perverted and duties came to be assigned according to *varnas* subdivided into castes on a hereditary basis.

In today's competitive world, finding a profession based on one's *svadharma* is not the norm. The tendency is to work for the highest remuneration, or to do whatever work one gets in this era of growing unemployment, even if it is incompatible with one's nature and disposition. So whatever work one is doing can be accepted as *svadharma*. The Gita says that all occupations are equally good, be they of a sanyasi or householder, of a judge or sweeper, and when performed to the best of one's ability and without attachment, help in advancing on the spiritual path.

Generally, we work for personal gain or satisfaction, which is a selfish motive. Selfish actions dissipate moral energy and do not promote spiritual development. Karma yoga is a system of ethics focused on unselfish action. According to Swami Vivekananda, that activity which is selfish is immoral, and that which is unselfish is moral. Work is never the cause of misery, selfishness is.

Vedic scriptures affirm that selfishness comes from attachment — with people, things, and to the results of one's work. It arises from a sense of possession that in turn comes from an identification with

things as 'mine'. This sense of 'mine' comes from identification with one's bodily identity, wherein one thinks in terms of 'my body', 'my intelligence', 'my property', and 'my children'. In reality, none of these are ours because everything belongs to God.

Non-attachment, *vairagya*, is a state of mind, rather than an external condition. A king may live in non-attachment, and a beggar in rags may be very attached to his meagre possessions. One must strive to attain a state of detachment where one seeks nothing, not even reward or praise, for any of one's actions and remains unaffected equally by the good and the bad. We are not, and cannot be, the architects of the fruits of our labour. Krishna tells Arjuna (*Gita* 2.47-50): "You have the right to perform your prescribed duty, but you are not entitled to the fruits of your actions. Never consider yourself the cause of the results of your activities, and never be attached to not doing your duty. Perform your duty with equipoise, O Arjuna, abandoning all attachments to success and failure and be equanimous in all conditions".

Selflessness in action does not come easy. One way to cultivate it is to surrender one's work unto the Lord. Krishna tells Arjuna (*Gita* 3.9): "Work has to be done as a sacrifice to God otherwise it causes bondage with this material world. Perform your prescribed duties for His satisfaction and without personal attachment". Again, in the *Gita* (9.27) he says: "Whatever you do, whatever you offer or give in charity, do it as an offering to Me".

Before Lord Krishna instructed him through the *Gita* to go ahead and perform his *svadharma*, Arjuna was attempting to escape from the situation under the pretence of becoming a renunciate. Krishna explained to him that to abjure activity and practise workless asceticism is sheer idleness and hypocrisy. Gauging Arjuna's state of mind that made it impossible for him to do his duty, Krishna commanded him (*Gita* 3.30): "Therefore, O Arjuna, surrendering all your actions unto Me, with full knowledge of Me, without desire for profit, with no claims to proprietorship and free from lethargy, fight (do your duty)". Indeed, this is Krishna's advice to all of us, too.

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