

Chapter XXIII

The three qualities inertia, passion, and purity; the 20 virtues essential for wisdom.

“The three qualities (*gunas*)—purity, passion, and dullness (*sathwa, rajas, thamas*)—undergo various permutations, combinations, and modifications and become manifested as all this creation, this universe (*prakriti*). Therefore, this creation is subject to change; it is not fixed. True. But the *Atma* is consciousness (*chaithanya*), which is sheer effulgence, so it is not subject to blemishes or modifications. The body is creation; the intellect (*buddhi*) and the mind (*manas*) are also creation; for this reason, they also differ according to the degree of excess or deficiency of one or other of the qualities.

“Purity (*sathwa-guna*) is steady, pure, unselfish, light, so those who have this characteristic will have no wish or want. They will be fit for knowledge of *Atma*. Those with passion (*rajoguna*) will be engaged in acts tarnished with a tinge of ego. They may have the urge to do service to others, but that urge will drive them on to win fame and take pride in their achievements. They will yearn for their own good, along with the good of others. Those who are endowed with dullness (*thamoguna*) are overcome by the darkness of ignorance, so they grope about, not knowing what is right and what is wrong.

“Any one of these three qualities makes one unfit for the realization of the highest reality, which liberates the individual and merges one in the Universal. Since the person is embedded in creation, the person fondly believes himself to be experiencing the qualities that form creation. But this is an illusion. To destroy this illusion, inquiry into the nature and characteristics of the field (*kshetra*) or creation (*prakriti*) has become necessary. For the beginner, the spiritual aspirant, inquiry into knowledge and the known are essential, but the wise one (*jnani*) has to pay more attention to these qualities. The Known is the Reality, the experience of the divine Basis of all.”

Arjuna listened attentively to all this, and at the end, he asked, “Oh Lord! What qualities should a wise one possess?”

Krishna replied, “Partha! One must have the twenty virtues in ample measure. You might ask what they are. I shall tell you about them; listen. But do not conclude that the goal can be reached when you have them all. The goal, Immortality, can be reached only by experiencing *Brahman*, since All this is indeed *Brahman* (*Sarvam Khalvidham Brahman*). When Knowledge is full, the Knower becomes the Known.

“For this consummation, one has to be purified by virtues. Then the Known can be experienced and Realization reached. Therefore, I shall first tell you about this. Virtue first, then victory. What a splendid path! To seek *Brahman* without first ensuring a moral and virtuous life is like desiring a flame without lamp or wick or oil! Acquire all these three, then you light it and get light. So it is with the light of Realization of *Brahman* or God (*Brahma-jnana*).

“There is one point here that aspirants have to note carefully. The lamp, the wick, and the oil must be proportionate. If the wick is too big or too small for the lamp, if the oil is too much or too little for the wick, if the lamp is too small or too huge for the oil or the wick, then the flame will not burn brightly and give light. Clear steady light can be secured only when all three are in proper proportion. The three qualities (*gunas*) must also be in equilibrium to yield the maximum result, liberation. The three qualities are bonds. People are bound by them, like a cow whose forelegs are tied together, whose hind legs are also bound and whose neck and horns are bound

by a third bond. The three-fold qualities are such three-fold bonds. How can the poor beast move freely when it is bound so? Purity (*sathwa-guna*) is a golden rope, passion (*rajoguna*) a copper rope, and dullness (*thamoguna*) an iron rope. All three bind effectively in spite of the difference in the cost of material. As bonds, all three are obstacles to freedom of movement.”

Arjuna asked, “Oh Lord! You said that twenty virtues are essential for becoming entitled to wisdom. What are they? Please describe them to me in some detail.”

“Arjuna! I am delighted at your earnestness,” said Krishna. “Listen.”

1. Humility. “The first virtue is humility, the absence of pride. As long as you have pride, you cannot earn wisdom. A person’s behaviour should be like the behaviour of water; whatever colour you pour into water, it absorbs it and never asserts its own colour. It is humble without conceit. But now the behaviour of people is quite contrary. When they do the smallest service or donate the slightest amount, they are anxious for people to know about it. For this, they go about prattling or arranging to get it published. The absence of such pride and ambition is what is recommended as humility.”

2. Absence of vanity. “The second is absence of vanity. This is a very great virtue in people. It means the absence of pretence, pompousness, boasting that one is great when one is not, claiming that one has power when one has nothing, that one has authority when one has no such title.”

Here, readers will note one point. The world today is full of this false pretence, this hypocrisy. Whichever field of activity you watch, whomever you observe, you discover this dire defect. The governments of nations are in the hands of people who are pretenders to power, authority, and capacity. Those with no knowledge claim to know everything. Those with no one even to help them at home claim that they have a huge following.

In every activity, this hypocrisy is the very first step. It ruins people in every field, like a pest that destroys the crop. If this hypocrisy is wiped away, the world will be saved from disaster. Pretence will make you lose this world and the next. It is harmful at all times and places. It does not suit ordinary people; how can it then be beneficial to the spiritual aspirant?

3. Nonviolence. “The third virtue is nonviolence (*ahimsa*). This also is an important virtue. Violence is not simply physical; it means even more: the mental pain that is inflicted, the anxiety and worry that are caused to others by your actions and words. If you desist from causing physical pain to others, you cannot claim to have nonviolence. Your activities must not cause pain and must be unselfish. Your thoughts, words, and deeds must all be free from any motive to cause such pain.”

4. Patience, fortitude. “The fourth is patience or fortitude (*kshama*, also called *sahana*). It means that you should consider as unreal the evil others do unto you, the loss you suffer through them, the hatred they evince toward you. Treat these as you treat a mirage. That is to say, you must develop that degree of patience or fortitude. It is not the helpless putting up with the evil that others do because you are powerless to retaliate. It is the expression of the peace that reigns in the heart, this outer behaviour.”

It is true that many people put up with the injury that others inflict because they lack physical, economic, or popular support; this suffering cannot be honoured as real fortitude.

5. Integrity. “Next, let us consider the fifth: straightforwardness, integrity, sincerity. It means the agreement of action, speech, and thought; this applies to secular and spiritual activity. This is a facet of the second virtue, ab-

sence of vanity.”

6. Reverential service rendered to the spiritual teacher. “The sixth is reverential service rendered to the spiritual teacher. This virtue will promote affection for the pupil, so one will benefit a great deal. But the guru who has no goal will only mislead the disciple into perdition. The guru must shower grace on the disciple as freely and as spontaneously as the mother cow feeds the young calf with milk. The teaching of the guru is the source and sustenance for attaining God and acquiring liberation.”

7. Cleanliness. “The seventh virtue is cleanliness (*soucham*) —not merely outer cleanliness but inner cleanliness. And what is inner cleanliness? The absence of affection and hatred, of desire and discontent, of lust and anger; and the presence of good, i.e. godly, qualities. Water cleans the body; truth cleans the mind. Knowledge cleans the reasoning faculty; penance and discipline cleans the individual.”

8. Steadfastness. “The eighth virtue is called steadfastness (*sthairyam*), fixity of faith, the absence of fickleness or waywardness. Aspirants must hold fast to what they have once fixed their faith upon as conducive to their spiritual progress. They should not flit from one ideal to another, changing their goal from day to day. This is also referred to as dedication. Fickleness, the product of weakness, has to be scrupulously avoided.”

9. Control of the senses. “The ninth is control of the senses. Be convinced that the senses have to subserve your best interests, not that you should subserve the interests of the senses. Do not be the slave of the senses; rather make them your slaves.”

10. Detachment. “Next, the tenth virtue: detachment or renunciation (*vairagya*) —the loss of appetite for sound, touch, form, taste, smell, etc. The senses run after these things because they titillate and give them temporary joy. However, the senses are not interested in the goals virtue-wealth-desire-liberation of the sublime type. The *Atma* can be discovered only through pursuit of the sublime.”

11. Absence of egotism. “The eleventh virtue is absence of egotism — the breeding ground of all vices and faults. The ego-centric individual pays no regard to right and wrong, good and bad, godly and wicked. That person doesn’t care for them, doesn’t even know about them. That person is completely ignorant of *dharma* and morals and will not conform to justice. To be devoid of this poisonous quality is to be endowed with absence of egotism. Egotism is a foe in the guise of a friend.”

12. Awareness of birth-death-senility-illness-grief. “The next virtue is called *janma-mrithyu-jaraa-vyadhi-dukha-dhosha-anudarsanam*, meaning only this: awareness of the inevitable cycle of birth and death, of senility and disease, of grief and evil, and of other signs of the temporariness of this created world and life in it. Although people see these things happening to them as well as others, they do not investigate the reasons for them and the methods of escaping from them. That is the greatest mystery, the wonder.

“If only you go to the root of the problem, you will realize that whatever else you may escape, you cannot escape death. What people conceive as happiness now is, in reality, only misery in the guise of happiness. So understand the truth of these things; reflect upon the flaws in the reasoning that delude you. Then, as a result, detachment is strengthened, and through that, you attain wisdom. Therefore, Oh Arjuna! liberate yourself from birth, death, senility, illness, and grief (*janma, mrithyu, jaraa, vyadhi, dukha*).” Thus spoke Krishna, exhorting Arjuna with a great deal of affection.

13. Detachment. Then He spoke of the withdrawal of desire from objects, the absence of yearning. The greed to

possess things that you see is caused by egotism. “I must have this”, “I must be the proud owner of this valuable thing”, this is how egotism prompts. It is a strong cord that binds you to objects. Withdraw the mind and treat all as manifestations of the Lord’s glory. Love all things as expressions of His glory, but do not delude yourself into the belief that possessing them will make you happy. That is an illusion. Do not dedicate your life for their sake; use them for your needs, as and when necessary, that is all. That kind of impulse activating you will be a great handicap in your progress toward liberation. Whatever you may acquire as property will have to be given up some day. On that last journey, you cannot take with you even a blade of grass or a pinch of dust. Keep this fact ever before the mind’s eye and then you can realize Reality.

14. Absence of clinging to family and home. Before birth, one has no relationship with this world and its material objects. After death, they and all kith and kin disappear. This sojourn is just a game played in the interval. Getting fascinated with this three-day fair is foolish indeed. Desire tarnishes the mind and makes people unfit for higher pursuits. Aspirants who seek liberation and realization must rid themselves of desire, for, like grease, once contacted it sticks and is difficult to remove.

15. Equanimity. After this, attention has to be paid also to another virtue, the state of equanimity, of undisturbed peace during joy and grief, prosperity and adversity, happiness and misery. This is the fifteenth virtue of a wise one (*jnani*). Being elevated or depressed by success and defeat, profit and loss, honour and dishonour is a futile activity. Accept all equally as the grace of God, His consecrated food (*prasadha*). Just as you wear shoes to tread over thorny places, or hold an umbrella to escape getting wet in rain, or sleep inside a mosquito curtain to escape the stings of insects, so too, arm yourself with an unshaken mind that is confident of the Lord’s grace and bear praise or blame, defeat or victory, pleasure or pain with equanimity. To live bravely through life, this equanimity is declared essential.

16. Devotion. Next is devotion without any other feeling or thought. When grief overtakes you, you run to God. When difficulty overpowers, you take refuge in the Lord of Venkata. When joy is restored, you throw Him overboard. When you are down with fever and your taste is ruined and your tongue is bitter, you crave for some hot pickle; but when the fever subsides and you are normal again, you do not relish the same pickle. Devotion is not a temporary salve. It is the unbroken contemplation of God without any other interposing thought or feeling.

Whatever the activity, recreation, or talk, it must be saturated with the Love of God. That is undivided, undistracted devotion.

17. Dwelling in solitude. Thereafter comes dwelling in solitude (*ekantha-vasam*). One must be fond of being alone. This does not mean keeping the body in some solitary place, far from the haunts of humanity. There must be solitude and silence in the mind; all its occupants must be forced or persuaded to quit. The mind should be contentless (*nir-vishaya*), turned away from the objective world.

18. Absence of interest in the company of others. The eighteenth virtue that helps to promote wisdom is mentioned as absence of interest in the company of people, that is to say, absence of the desire to mix with people engrossed in affairs that concern the objective world. One can attain equanimity even in the midst of wild animals, but it is difficult to win it while among worldly minded ones. Spiritual discipline will be affected by the company you keep. Good people keep you good; bad people drag you away into badness.

Of course, it is hard to find out who are good and who are bad and then settle among the good. So, it is advisable to avoid people and concentrate on spiritual discipline. The human mind is like iron; if it falls into mud,

it rusts and disintegrates; if it falls into fire, it loses dross and becomes pure. Therefore, joining the company of wise people is better than being in solitude. Note how Narada, who was the son of a housemaid, became a sage because he fell in the company of god people; Rathnakara, who was a cruel hunter, got the company of the seven sages, so he was transformed into the First Among Poets, the *adi-kavi*. Evil company is highly detrimental. A red-hot iron ball is capable of causing more damage than a flame of fire; a sinful one is more to be avoided than sin itself. Aspirants have to be vigilant about the company they keep.

19. Awareness of the distinction between *Atma* and non-*Atma*. The nineteenth virtue is “awareness of the distinction between *Atma* and non-*Atma*.” Fix your consciousness always on the *Atmic* Reality and discard the body and senses as unreal and impermanent. *Atma* is the Eternal, so establish yourself only in that and not in the transient non-*Atmic* illusions or objects. Life is a struggle to achieve victory over the illusion that haunts: I am the eternal *Atma* in you and in all. So fix the mind on Me and engage yourself in the struggle, confident of victory.

20. Vision of the true nature of That. The twentieth and last qualification one has to earn is “vision of the true nature of ‘That (*Thath*)’ (*Thathwa-jnana-darsanam*)”, the universal principle of which the particular is but a shadow. It means that the spiritual aspirant should have a keen desire to visualize the universal.

Of the above-mentioned twenty virtues, if honest efforts are made to earn even two or three, the rest will come naturally to the seeker. No special effort is needed to earn them. As progress is made on the path, one acquires not only the twenty, but even a larger number of virtues. The twenty are mentioned here because they are the outstanding ones, that is all. Spiritual discipline based on these virtues takes one easily to the goal. That is why Krishna emphasized these.

Equipped with these, one can realize the Self; there need be no doubt on that, for they lead to the knowledge that the body, the senses, the intelligence, the inner consciousness—all are affiliated with the worldly (*prakriti*) aspect. And one who is distinct from all this is the perfect person (*purusha*). The perfect person is the one who is aware of the body (*kshetra*), the knower of the body (*kshetra-jna*). When one is able to distinguish between the soul (*purusha*) and nature (*prakriti*) or, which is the same thing, between field and the knower of the body, one becomes the witness and is free from all touch of want or wish.