

Chapter XXVI

Regulation of food and recreation; pure, passionate, and dull food; physical, mental, and vocal disciplines; pure, passionate, and dull charity and recreation.

“Krishna! You say that the divine (*daiva*) and demonic (*asuric*) natures of people are the consequences of acts and feelings that had impact on the individual in previous births. Since it is impossible to escape from such impacts, what is the fate of those who are condemned to carry this burden with them? Are there any means by which this can be avoided? Or can their consequences be mitigated? If such exist, please tell me those, for I could save myself thereby”. Arjuna asked thus in order to draw out from the Lord the remedy for all mankind.

Krishna answered immediately. “There is no paucity of means. Listen. There are three types of qualities (*gunas*): pure, passionate, and dull (*sathwic, rajasic, thamasic*). They are based on the inner consciousness (*anthah-karana*). That too depends on the intake of food. You are what you feed on, and your activities shape your nature. So at least in this birth, by regulating food and recreation, people can overcome the demonic tendencies that tend to prevail upon them. Through planned self-effort, they can promote tendencies toward purity.” This advice was tendered lovingly by the Lord to the eager inquirer, Arjuna.

Arjuna was thrilled with joy when he heard that people have the means of saving themselves, and he longed to be further informed. Krishna showered His grace through His enchanting smile and condescended to reply. “Arjuna! Food is the chief formative force. The soiled mind dulls the brilliance of moral excellence. How can a muddy lake reflect clearly? The Divine cannot be reflected in the wicked or vicious mind. Food makes people strong in body, and the body is intimately connected with the mind. Strength of mind depends upon strength of body too. Moral conduct, good habits, spiritual effort—all depend upon the quality of the food. Disease, mental weakness, spiritual slackness—all are produced by faulty food.”

“Krishna!” asked Arjuna, “Pray tell me the constituents of food that is pure, passionate, or dull (*sathwic, rajasic, or thamasic*).”

“Arjuna! To be pure, food should be capable of strengthening the mind as well as the body. It should not be too salty, too hot, too bitter, too sweet, or too sour. It should not be taken while steaming hot. Food that fans the flames of thirst should be avoided. The general principle is that there should be a limit, a restraint. Food cooked in water should not be used the next day, for it becomes harmful. Even fried articles should be consumed before they develop unpleasant odours.

“Passionate (*rajasic*) food is the opposite of the *sathwic*. It is too salty, too sweet, too hot, too sour, too odourous. Such food excites and intoxicates.”

“Lord, excuse me if I appear impertinent; I ask with a desire to know, that is all. By mere change in food habits, can character be changed from one quality to another? Or has something more to be done to supplement the purification process? Tell me if there is anything more.”

“My dear brother-in-law! If transformation of character were so easy, wickedness and vice, so characteristic of the demonic nature, could have been wiped off the surface of the earth in a trice. Of course, there are more things to be done. Listen. There are three ‘purities’ to be observed: purity of the provisions; purity of the vessels in which food is prepared, and purity of the people who serve the prepared food.

“It is not enough if the provisions are pure and of good quality. They should have been procured by fair means; no unfair, unjust, untrue earnings should be used for one’s maintenance. These are fouled at the very source. The source as well as the course and the goal must all be equally pure. The vessel must be clean, free from tarnish. The person who serves must not only be clean in dress but clean in habits, character, and conduct. The person should be free from hate, anger, worry, and indifference while serving the dishes; the person should be cheerful and fresh, humble and full of love. While attending those who are dining, the person should not allow the mind to dwell on wicked or vicious ideas. Mere physical cleanliness or charm is no compensation for evil thoughts and habits.

“The spiritual aspirant who has to secure concentration has to be careful about these restrictions. Otherwise, during meditation, the subtle influences of the wicked thoughts of the cook and the servers will haunt the aspirant. Care should be taken to have only virtuous individuals around. Outer charm, professional excellence, reduced wages—these should not be allowed to prejudice you in favour of dangerous cooks and attendants. Examine carefully their habits and their character. The food you eat is such an important constituent of the physical and mental stuff with which you have to struggle in the spiritual field. Purity of mind can be and has to be supplemented by purity of the body as well as purity in its important function, speech. That is the real penance (*tapas*), physical, mental, and vocal.

“The mind should be free from anxiety and worry, hate and fear, greed and pride. It should be saturated with love for all beings. It has to dwell in God. It has to be restrained from pursuing objective pleasures. No lower thought should be allowed to creep in; all thoughts must be directed toward the elevation of the individual to higher planes. This is the proper spiritual discipline (*tapas*) of the mind (*manas*).

“Now for the physical disciplines. Use the body and its strength and capabilities for the service of others, for worship of the Lord, for singing His Glory, for visiting places hallowed by His Name, for regulated exercises in breath control, for holding the senses away from deleterious paths, and for treading the path of God. Service of the sick and the distressed, observance of moral codes—such beneficial acts must make it sacrosanct.

“Vocal penance (*tapas*) also has to be engaged in. Avoid talking too much; desist from false statements; do not take delight in backbiting and scandal-mongering; never speak harshly; speak softly and sweetly, speak with the memory of Madhava ever in the background of the mind.

“Even if one of these three (the physical, mental, and vocal disciplines) is absent, the *Atmic* effulgence cannot radiate light. The lamp, the wick, and the oil are all essential for a light; the body is the lamp; the mind, the oil; the tongue, the wick. All three must be in good trim.

“Some pious people also consider acts of charity to be physical asceticism. It is good that they think so. But when doing charity, one has to do so after pondering over the place, the time, and the nature of the recipient. For example, charities for schools should be given at places where there are no schools until then; hospitals have to be established in areas where diseases are rampant; the hunger of people has to be appeased where famine conditions have been caused by floods or drought. The nature and condition of the recipient has to be considered while imparting teaching of *dharma* and spiritual attainment (*Brahma-vidya*) and while doing service of various kinds. The charitable act that removes from a person the deficiency that is most harmful to progress is called good (*sathwic*).”

“Krishna,” interrupted Arjuna. ‘May I ask a question? Charity, however done, is charity, isn’t it? Why do you

distinguish between pure, passionate, and dull (*sathwic*, *rajasic*, *thamasic*) charities? Are there any such?"

Krishna answered, "Of course there are. Among those who donate for charities, most are anxious to get name and fame; that is the motive for the act. They are after something in return for what they offer. Very few desire the grace of the Lord and nothing else. Gifts made with that one end in view, to receive the grace of the Lord, are good (*sathwic*). Gifts made expecting something in return, like fame and publicity, public esteem, and power, or gifts made in a huff or made reluctantly under pressure —these are to be classed as passionate (*rajasic*).

"Charity should be given with reverence and faith. It should not just be thrown at the face of the recipient. Nor should it be given to an undeserving person or at an inopportune moment. Food for the overfed is a burden, not a boon. Hospitals in places that are inaccessible are as good as charity thrown away. Such benefitless and wasteful charity is called dull or ignorant (*thamasic*).

"While engaged in charity (*danam*), one has to be very vigilant. Do not scatter it to whomsoever pleads for it; nor can you shower it on all kinds of places. Be careful that you remember the three types mentioned by Me and then do what seems most proper. The gift you make must not be for name or fame; it should have no motive of pomp or publicity; it should be purposeful and useful. In all acts, the pure (*sathwic*) attitude is best. This attitude must permeate all things seen, heard and spoken."

Arjuna, who was listening with head bent and with great concentration to all this, drinking in the sweetness of the Lord's countenance, asked Him thus, "What exactly is true listening and true seeing? Please tell me this in some detail. I can then follow the instructions." He prayed to Krishna in such a pleading tone that the Lord smiled kindly at him.

Krishna patted Arjuna on the back. He said, "Pure (*sathwic*) listening is listening to the stories, experiences, and messages of sages and saints who aspired after God and realized Him. Pure seeing is seeing the worshippers of the Lord, seeing the portraits of saints and sages, attending festivals in temples, etc. Passionate (*rajasic*) seeing is seeing scenes of luxury, pictures of sensuous joy, of pompous pageantry, of the exhibition of power and status and display of egoistic authority. Taking delight in the description of sensuous scenes and incidents, in the demonstration of power and authority, in the assertion of might and prowess —these are to be classified as passionate (*rajasic*) listening. Others take delight in listening to gruesome adventures, stories of wicked ogres and vicious deeds. Such are *thamasic* individuals. They admire cruelty and terrifying tactics and take pleasure in keeping such pictures before them. They worship demonic bloodthirsty Gods and revel in the lore of ghosts and evil forces."

Dear Readers! This is the heart of the teaching of the *Bhagavad Gita*. The body and life in it are based on food (*anna*) and are sustained by food. So food decides the level of attainment, high or low. Nowadays, emphasis is being laid on discipline and regulated behaviour (*nishta*), without reference to food (*naashta*). However great and learned one may be, however much one pays attention to the teachings of the *Vedanta* and takes care to spread them, if one neglects the strict code laid down for the food that is the very basis of the body and its functions, one cannot succeed. The purity of the provisions, of the cook, and of those who serve what has been prepared have all to be attended to.

People feel content when their stomachs are filled, when hunger is appeased. The first temple they visit when dawn breaks is the restaurant where rice cakes (*idli*) and lentil soup (*sambar*) are offered to the *Atma-rama*! How can such gourmands get concentration? Purity in cooking, purity of provisions, and purity of service —how can these be guaranteed in restaurants? Who pays attention to these? Without doing this, people complain aloud that

they do not get success in concentration and suffer greater confusion! The effect will be secured only when the proper causes function well. When bitter things are cooked, how can the final dish be sweet?

Food (*ahara*) and recreation (*vihara*) are both very carefully regulated in the *Gita*, but little heed is paid to its teaching. Nor is it considered so essential. There are people everywhere who swear by the *Gita*, who expound it for hours together, and who preach about it, but very few put its teachings into practice. The verses fill their heads, but they are powerless to meet reverses with philosophical cheer.

Bliss and peace can be secured only when food and recreation are cleansed and purified. Darkness and light cannot co-exist; *kama* (desire) and Rama cannot be in the same place together; they are like fire and water. How can one escape an evil reaction if the *Gita* is held in one hand and hot tea or coffee or a lighted cigarette or a pinch of snuff is held in the other? Some even justify their unregulated lives by declaring that whatever is eaten, however eaten, wherever eaten, the stuff is rendered pure and acceptable on account of the raging fire of spiritual wisdom (*jnana*) that they have in them! How can a bitter fruit be transformed into a sweet one when it is dipped in a series of holy rivers? How can people who simply speak on the *Gita* get saturated with the sweetness of its message? What really happens is that those who listen to such hypocrisies lose even the little faith they have in our scriptures and become hardened disbelievers.

How can a person who feels helpless to restrict and regulate food habits be trusted to restrict and regulate the senses? If such people cannot limit and control their feeding, how can they limit and control the senses? Can the nose that falls down at a cough survive a sneeze? How can one who is too weak to climb stairs climb to heaven's heights? How can helpless victims of coffee or cigarettes or snuff muster the strength and courage to overcome the more powerful foes: anger, lust, and greed? When one can't renounce dirt, how can one renounce desire? Become master of the tongue, and then you can master sex. They are firmly interconnected, as close as the eye and the feet.