

Chapter XVIII. Activity and Action

Spiritual versus materialistic lands

The countries of the world fall into two categories: countries in which the people are devoted to activities with spiritual motivation (*karma-bhumi*) and countries in which the people pursue the pathways of the senses (*bhoga-bhumi*), with no higher purpose to guide them. The categories emphasize the ideals of the people down through the ages. India (Bharath) is the land of Godward activity, where the people have discovered the proper goal of all activity, namely the glorification of God resident within and without.

Activity (*karma*) is inevitable; it is immanent in every thought. It is of two kinds: material and spiritual, connected with this world and drawn from the *Vedas* or scriptural injunctions. Activities that merely sustain life are material. Activities that elevate the human into the divine are based either on the *Vedas* or on later sacred texts (*sastras*) or codes of law (*smrithi*). The activities can be mental, emotional, or physical. They are also determined by the activities that the individual has adopted in either previous lives or this life. *Karma* can be classified into three categories: the consequences of acts done in past lives that are affecting this life (*prarabdha*); activity engaged in now, which is bound to affect the future (*aagaami*); and the stored *karma* that is slowly being worked out by the individual in life after life (*sanchitha*).

Secret of actions and reactions

The *Vedas* (*sruthis*) and the codes of law (*smrithi*) of India have thus classified *karma* on the basis of the consequences it creates in the life of the individual. The word *karma* is short and crisp; it is used freely by all and sundry. But the idea and ideals it conveys are of great significance to mankind. *Karma* is not simply physical; it is mental, verbal, and manual. Each one can read into it as much value and validity as their reason can unravel.

Karma subsumes every activity of people —worldly, scriptural, and spiritual. All three strands are, in truth, intertwined. The worldly *karma* entails merit or demerit; the scriptural *karma* is saturated with the experience of generations of good seekers; the spiritual devotes itself to the cleansing of the heart so that the indwelling God may be reflected therein. *Karma* is a stream that flows ever faster and faster, turning the wheel of life and keeping it incessantly active.

Karma means movement, or that which urges the movement. Air moves in space; the moving air results in heat. It is the friction caused by aerial motion that makes the latent heat manifest. Living beings are able to maintain the temperature of the body as long as air is breathed in and out. The quicker the breath, the warmer the body. Warmth is the characteristic of fire. Fire is the origin of water. The Sun, as one can see, raises clouds. The particles of water get mixed with other elements and then harden into “earth” (ground, soil). The earth produces and fosters plants and trees, which feed and foster humanity, keeping people hale and hearty. These plants give the grain upon which people live, and the seminal fluid that produces progeny is the gift of the grain. Thus is the activity (*karma*) of creation effected and continued. This is how the codes of law texts (*smrithi*) summarize the process.

In short, activity (*karma*) is observable here as movement, as progress, as evolution, and as hereditary effect.

Triple yearnings, triplets of divinity

It is only natural and reasonable to expect that this vast flow, this constant movement must have something fixed and unmoving as its base and support. This is exactly what is posited as *Atma* or the Supreme *Brahman* (*Parabrahman*). The very first vibratory movement on that base happened when the Supreme *Brahman* became the Highest Godhead (*Parameswara*) and expressed the three thirsts for wisdom (*jnana*), wish, and action. That very movement was known as the primordial act (*karma*), the act of Being, transforming itself into becoming, the act of creation (*srishti*).

The importance of action (*karma*) necessitated the triple aspects of Divinity: Brahma (who causes creation), Vishnu (who supports and sustains) and Maheswara (who dissolves and destroys). The law of *karma* rules the motions of the stars, the planets, the galaxies, and other heavenly bodies in space. The same law directs and controls all that happens in all the worlds. It is inscrutable in its very essence. No one can penetrate the time or space when *karma* was not. What, why, when, and how events happen is beyond the capacity of people to predict with accuracy. They are laid down from eternity to eternity.

Experience non-action in action and vice versa

Just as a work being done or an activity that is engaging one can be referred to as *karma*, no work being done and no activity being engaged in are also *karma*! On seeing people silent and calm, sitting quiet and doing nothing, we infer that they are free from activity. How, then, can they be described as doing activity? What is meant by saying, “They are not doing any work; they are not engaged in any activity”? That statement means only that “They are engaged in keeping themselves away from any work or activity.” So, it can be affirmed that people sometimes are busy doing work and sometimes busy keeping work away from their attention; that is to say, they are engaged in activity (*karma*) as well as inactivity (*a-karma*). If they are not engrossed or attached with the action they do and are engaged in it as their duty, as their way of worship, and if they are not attached to the fruit of their action, then they can practise inactivity even in action. This is the highest spiritual discipline.

The very first act with which the career of a living being starts is “breathing and vibration of vital airs”. When one thinks of it, it is wonderful how it happens. It is an amazing mystery. No human being resolves, at the moment of earthly life, to draw in and breathe out the air that exists around him. It proceeds without being willed or wished for. Not only people but every living organism is evidence of this great marvel.

Doubts may be raised: How can anything happen to people without their knowledge or their resolution? It is best to answer this doubt by confessing that people can’t unravel such secrets. Even if an attempt is made to reply that nature is the cause, the question still remains: What exactly is nature? Breathing begins when life begins; it is an automatic, natural act, it is said. But all this is only saying the same thing in other words. They do not explain anything. It can as well be said that we are ignorant how it happens just when it is most essential. It is indeed surprising that the act of breathing is a mystery even to the person who breathes.

As you think, so you become

When we reflect on the fact that *yogis* exercise their will and stop their pulse beats and their inhaling-exhaling process, we realize the power of will in inducing action (*karma*). Action, we can infer, is not something hanging loose in midair! Unless we become doers, deeds do not emanate. An axiom in the *Nyaya Sastra* says:

As one knows, so one wishes; as one wishes, so one acts (*na jnathi, icchathi yathathe*).

The *Vedanta Sutras* also proclaim the same truth.

That on which attention rests, that is the thing wished for (*yad-dhyaayathi, thad icchathi*).

That on which the wish rests, that is the thing for which deeds are done (*yad-icchathi thad karothe*).

That for which deeds are done, that is what he becomes (*yath karothe, thadbhavathi*).

The manifest nature of the individual is moulded by desire. One shapes oneself in line with hopes, aspirations, attempts, and achievements. Even one's own future life is designed through one's decisions and deeds. The force that one's "reason" exerts on oneself and that directs one's will in specific directions is known as nature (*prakriti*). When once it is discovered that one's own level of intelligence is the prime factor in determining one's inclinations and desires, then, it is easy to follow the means by which one can win release from the hold of nature.

Perform work with dedication

Karma is generally known to mean "work". Transactions and actions of all kinds can be designated as "work". There are no levels of work, like low or high. All work is holy, if it has to be done for the upkeep and uplift of life. This is why work (*karma*) is praised as highly sacrosanct and desirable and as fraught with meritorious or deleterious consequences.

The Hindus ascribe good fortune and bad, joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, to the inescapable fruit of work, so some have labeled as idlers those who do not resist and overwhelm distress, disease, and pain. This is a partial, paralytic, view, which ignores the guiding principles and underlying philosophy of work and knows it only as reflected in worldly, material activities. This view is adopted and emphasized to help particular sections to progress, that is all.

Take some examples from within your own experience. The commuter working in an office, the farmer who lives on his own toil, the porter who depends on his physical strength to gather the meagre means of livelihood, the blacksmith, the potter, the carpenter, the washerman, the barber—they are conscious of the activities they have to follow and the sense of duty with which they have to follow them. They know that their lives cannot flow smoothly when they don't fill their assignments with dedication. Therefore, they engage themselves in their profession as best as their intelligence, skills, and aspirations allow. But where is the need to prompt such people into further activity, to warn them and encourage them? We have to undertake this task only when they are unable or unwilling to carry on their duties.

Caste averts confusion of duties

In the case of Arjuna, who was confused about his duty and who withheld from battle since he was befogged by a feeling of renunciation, Sri Krishna said, "You have only to concentrate on the act and carry it out as you can. To act and only to act is the duty imposed on you." That was the immortal nectarine advice of the Lord, and it is quoted by many. But it must be pointed out that this advice was given in the context of the restoration of righteousness. It deals with activities approved by holy scriptures (*sastras*), and not with worldly, sensual, and animal activities like seeking food, shelter, and mates.

Dharmaraja and others were immersed in worldly affairs, and they were past masters in dealing with worldly situations. They were engaged constantly in following and fostering duties and responsibilities laid down for the four castes in society and the four stages of life. Why then should they be prompted and persuaded, counseled and commanded to engage in battle? Krishna advised only Arjuna to resume his bow and arrows, presenting before him many an argument.

“You are born into the warrior (*kshatriya*) caste, the caste entrusted by social norms with execution of one social duty: fighting against injustice. Engaging in battle against wickedness is your responsibility. Do not desert that duty and discard that burden. People are bound to the inclinations implanted in them by nature. Again, consider this. People have to be ever involved in some activity or other; they can’t live without it even for a moment. Therefore, it is best that you act now, in accordance with the inclination and skill impressed on you by your ancestry and heredity.” This is the lesson taught to Arjuna, the path of the caste or class to which he belonged.

Does “work” connote only acts by which food etc. are procured? Aircraft, ships, factories, hospitals are products of work. They can also be said to involve only worldly material “work”. This type of work is important for living, and happy living here is preparation for spiritual advancement in the hereafter. The more faulty one’s activities in worldly pursuits, the less success there will be for the individual, the society, and the nation. There can be no two opinions on these points. Nevertheless, people do not exert as efficiently and as enthusiastically for spiritual advancement as they do for worldly success and fame. This is indeed a pity.