

VEDĀNTA 20/20
INTRODUCTION TO VEDĀNTA
KARMA YOGA

In the four previous sessions we have seen *purṣārtha*, human goals, *śāstra*-s, the scriptures that help us in the fulfillment of human goals, *varṇa* and *āśrama dharma*, the scriptural infrastructure or schemes and stages for human life. Now in the following sessions we will see the course of discipline prescribed by the scriptures for accomplishing these goals. We previously saw the overall scheme, the family and social conditions were presented. Now we will get into the course of discipline that one should follow for the realization of these goals, both the material accomplishments and spiritual accomplishment. Remember material accomplishments may be many but there is only one spiritual accomplishment. In fact all material accomplishments also should culminate in one spiritual accomplishment of *mokṣa*. Without *mokṣa* human life is incomplete. So the material accomplishments are incidental goals and the spiritual accomplishment as the ultimate and primary goal of life. That alone gives the sense of fulfillment that everyone knowingly or unknowingly seeks.

Keeping all the goals, and especially the spiritual goal in mind, the scriptures prescribe a course of discipline which we call *sādhana*. *Sādhana* is a set of spiritual practices that we undertake to accomplish a *sādhya*, goal. When a spiritual aspirant seeking a *sādhya*, undertakes the *sādhana*, he is called a *sādhaka*. So scriptures want us to become *sādhaka*-s, taking to *sādhana* for accomplishing the *sādhya* and once we do that, we become *siddhā*. *Sādhaka* to *siddhā* is the journey of life. When I say *siddhā*, do not imagine miraculous powers. A *siddhā* is one who is totally at home with himself. This entire course of *sādhana* is broadly divided into three levels or segments for the convenience of understanding and practice. Each level is called *yoga*. The word *yoga* means that which connects the *sādhaka* and the *sādhya*, the seeker

and the sought. *Yoga* is derived from the root *yuj*, to combine, to unite, to join the *sādhaka*, seeker and *sādhya*, the goal. The first one of the three levels is called *karma yoga*, the second is *upāsana yoga* and the third is *jñāna yoga*.

We can visualize the entire course of discipline as a staircase with three steps. With these three steps, we can climb and reach the ultimate goal of *mokṣa*. We will study all three of them. Keep in mind these are not alternate paths. You cannot say I will take *karma yoga*, let her take *upāsana yoga* and let him take *jñāna yoga*. You just teach me what I want. No, we have to study all of them put into practice all three of them. According to scriptures all the three steps are important. They are necessary steps to be taken by all. We have to necessarily know all the three *yoga*-s and resort to all the three *yoga*-s. I will discuss one *yoga* in each of the three sessions. I will first start with *karma yoga*.

Karma yoga consists of two words, it is a compound word consisting of two words, one is *karma* and the other is *yoga*. The word *karma* in this context refers to proper actions. The word *yoga* means proper attitude in doing such actions. So in simple language, *karma yoga* is nothing but performing the appropriate actions with the right attitude. We have to understand what is proper or appropriate. All the actions possible for us are broadly classified into three types. The three types are based on the spiritual influence on human beings. The kind of impact the various actions have on us spirituality determines the type of action. The spiritual personality and spiritual goal is most important according to scriptures. So the actions are categorized not based on the materialistic benefits, but on spiritual influence. The first type is *uttama karma*-s, those actions that have maximum positive spiritual influence. *Madhyama karma*-s have only middling influence, have limited influence to positively contribute to spiritual progress. The third category is the *adhama karma*-s, those actions that have a negative spiritual contribution. They take you away from spiritual progress. They cause spiritual fall. These are the

three types of *karma*-s, *uttama*, *madhyama* and *adhama karma*-s.

The *uttama karma*-s are also called *sāttvika karma*-s. In the 17th chapter of *Bhagavad Gītā*, Śrī Kṛṣṇa deals with this topic elaborately. They are defined as all *para upakāra karma*-s, those actions which will benefit maximum number of beings, those actions that contribute to the welfare of others. Such actions are greatly praised in our scriptures. *Paropakāra puṇyāya, pāpāya para pīḍanam*, helping others is *puṇya* and hurting others is *pāpa*. *Paropakārārtha idaṁ śarīram*, this body of ours is meant for helping others. The *uttama karma*-s are those in which you give more to others than what you take from them. Greater is your giving, greater is your growing. Our culture is a giving culture, charity and sacrifice are the hallmark of our culture. A materialistic culture is a grabbing culture. The *paropakāra karma*-s are otherwise called *niškāma karma*-s. *Uttama, sāttvika, paropakāra* and *niškāma karma*-s all mean the same. They contribute to maximum spiritual progress.

So what are those *paropakāra karma*-s? Scriptures present them as *pañca mahā yajña*-s. It is very difficult to translate the word *yajña* and so I will use it as such. In all these *yajña*-s, I contribute to the welfare of the world. The first one is called *deva yajña*. This is the worship of God. I just stand in front of the Lord, in front of any *iṣṭa devatā*, and with full and total heart utter a prayer. The noblest prayer that is known in our scriptures is *svasti prajābhyaḥ paripālayantam, nyāyyena mārgena mahīm mahīśāḥ, go-brāhmaṇebhyaḥ śubhamastu nityam, lokāḥ samastāḥ sukhino bhavantu*, a sincere, heartfelt, deep prayer for the welfare of all beings including humans, animals, plants and the whole environment. It even goes beyond the terrestrial plane too. *Sarve bhavantu sukhinaḥ, sarve santu nirāmayāḥ, sarve bhadraṇi paśyantū, mā kaścid duḥkhabhāḡ bhavet*, when I utter these prayers in front of the Lord, I am doing the greatest contribution to the creation. In any other service I am confined to contribute to a limited sphere. No individual or organization can reach the entire creation, but this one prayer is the most inclusive. This is the most extensive and least expensive *paropakāra karma*. Along with this prayer,

if you offer something to the Lord, whatever you offer will also be distributed to the entire creation. It is often said *mānava seva* is *Mādhava seva*, but really speaking *Mādhava seva* is a more expansive *mānava seva*. What I offer to the Lord will reach the entire humanity. This is *deva yajña* and it should be done daily.

The second *yajña* is *pitṛ yajña*. In each *yajña* there is an expression of gratitude also. Gratitude + *upakāra* is *yajña*. I express my gratitude to the Lord for what the Lord has given to me and I contribute to the creation. In *pitṛ yajña*, I express my gratitude to my forefathers because of whom I am here. My parents gave me the body that I have, they also raised me, given me physical, emotional and spiritual nourishment without any expectation of anything in return. In *pitṛ yajña* I contribute to the welfare of all the ancestors. Then you may ask, how can you call it *paropakāra*? You are only contributing to your ancestors! No, in all *pitṛ karma*-s there is another contribution, an important contribution. There are many ancestors who do not get the benefit of *śrāddha karma*-s because they do not have children or their descendants do not perform such *karma*-s. Such ancestors are like orphans but they are served by those who perform *pitṛ yajña*. *Pitṛ yajña mantra*-s specifically mention such redirection. All *pitṛ yajña*-s whether it is *śrāddha karma*-s or *tarpaṇa* are great *paropakāra karma*-s.

The third *yajña* is *brahma yajña* which is expressing my gratitude to the ṛṣī-s. They have revealed to *veda*-s to us as well as given us other scriptures. *Brahma yajña* means *veda yajña* in which I worship both the scriptures and those who have brought them to us. I am able to enjoy this wonderful holistic culture because of them. In what way as I going to help the ṛṣī-s? The ṛṣī-s do not need any help from me. They only want the teachings to be spread. That is their one and only intention. They have given the wonderful scriptures and they only want the preservation and propagation of these teachings. Whatever I do to preserve and propagate is a great service because

scriptures help the humanity. Scriptures help humanity in two ways. The very sound of scriptures help humanity in creating peace. That is why *veda pāṛāyaṇa* is a great *sādhana*. When I chant the scriptures aloud, the very *śabda*, the very *veda gośa* purifies the creation. So *veda pāṛāyaṇa* is *brahma yajña*.

The second aspect is the learning and teaching of the scriptures. This is called *adhyāpanam*. Scriptural teaching is the best form of *brahma yajña*. There is a big difference between teaching and preaching. Preaching is giving a set of stray discourses on unconnected topics. It is some form of *satsaṅga* where someone shares some thoughts, some advice, some stories, spending some time uttering some nice words. It is certainly useful, but there is a very big difference between such preaching and systematic teaching. In teaching there is a thought development, there is connection between each topic, and all the ideas are supported through scriptures, through logic and through experience. With the help of *śruti*, *yukti* and *anubhūti*, when systematically the teaching is presented, it is totally different from preaching. Preaching can inspire people, but only teaching is *brahma yajña*. The difference is like between dumping a ton of bricks in your yard and arranging the bricks and cementing together systematically. In the first case, it will just occupy some space whereas in the second case, it can become a space that you can occupy as a house. Spiritual teaching gives you a beautiful vision of the Truth and that gives you security, peace and happiness. So *brahma yajña* is very very important. *Brahma yajña* was there in the *guru kula saṁpradāya* and the teaching was given. That tradition is going away. If it has been revived to some extent, the credit goes to *Svāmi Cinmayānanda* and now his disciples continue to do that service. They bring the scriptures in the form of teaching. Previously discourses were there. Even now stray discourses are there. If at all the teaching was there, it was in isolated pockets. As a movement it is the *Cinmaya* movement that has done so. This is *brahma yajña* and its purpose is indeed *paropakāra*, because *vidyādānam sarva dānāt pradhānam*, among all charity, charity of knowledge

is prime. The best charity is giving knowledge. That is why *Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa* says whoever teaches *Bhagavad Gītā*, I love them the most. This is the third *yajña*, *brahma yajña*, learning and sharing.

The fourth *yajña* is *manuṣya yajña*. All forms of social service come under this, running orphanages, helping old people who do not have help, building schools, building hospitals, all forms of social services is *manuṣya yajña*. This is most prominent now. I do not have to explain a whole lot, but the problem is that people think that it can replace all the other *yajña*-s. This is a misconception. *Manuṣya yajña* is important, but it is not the only *yajña*. The others should also be done.

Then the fifth *yajña* is *bhūta yajña*, contributions to all beings other than human being is called *bhūta yajña*. Contribution to the environment in the form of preservation and so forth come under this category. Environment contributes to my life and they have to be protected and not just exploited. I should take care of animal kingdom, plant kingdom, rivers, lakes and mountains. They all contribute to my survival and so should I contribute to their survival. If such mutual contribution is not there, there will only be a mutual destruction. Even if I do not positively contribute, at least let me not pollute the environment. Little simple traditions like watering the *tulasi* plant at home, or offering a ball of rice to the crows, decorating the floor with *rangoli* rice flour that ants may eat, these are all for *bhūta yajña*. Centuries after the industrial revolution, in the name of scientific and technological advancement and modern living by which we have slowly destroying the environment, today there is the beginning of ecological sensitivity. There should be the awareness of totality. In our daily prayers like *sandhya vandana* we remember all the planets. We are global, universal citizens. This grand awareness I should have and I should contribute. This is called *pañca mahā yajña*-s. The *uttama karma*-s, *niśkāma karma*-s will contribute to my spiritual growth.

Then the *madhyama karma*-s are the second set of *karma*-s and they are all *sakāma karma*-s, otherwise called *rājasa karma*-s, or *para udāsana karma*-s. They are those actions in which I ignore the welfare of others. I am just indifferent to all others. I don't care about them. They have to take care of themselves. I will take care of me. All those selfish *karma*-s are called *sakāma karma*-s will help you in your material well-being, but they do not contribute much to your spiritual growth. All *kāmya karma*-s whether ritualistic or non-ritualistic belong to this category. Even going to the temple, doing an *arcana* is only for the benefit of my son, daughter, there is no thought of the welfare of any body else, just me and my family. This is *madhyama karma*-s and I do not need to say much more, because all of us are doing this very efficiently.

Then comes *adhama karma*-s that are *tāmasa karma*-s, *nīśiddha karma*-s, prohibited actions, corrupt actions, destructive actions, *para apakāra karma*-s. These are actions from which I benefit, but in the process I hurt others. They certainly do not help you spiritually, but they will bring you down. The first set brings about spiritual elevation, the second set leads to spiritual stagnation, and the third set contributes to spiritual retrogression. These are the three types of *karma*-s introduced by the scriptures. Scriptures point out that a *karma yogi*'s attempt is to change the proportions of *karma*-s in such a way that the *uttama karma*-s are dominant in our life, *madhyama karma*-s are less so, limited selfish actions because we do need to take care of personal and family needs. Then scriptures point out even if some inevitable *adhama karma*-s are there, because of unavoidable situations, for example using bug killers, you are happy but not the bugs, such actions can be neutralized by *uttama karma*-s. Thus *uttama karma*-s help in two ways, one by contributing to your spiritual growth and two by neutralizing *pāpā* that come from *adhama karma*-s that are inevitable. This is the aim of a *karma yogi*, to have the right mix.

Now we have to talk about the proper attitude. What is the proper attitude?

Attitude is born out of understanding. You can never develop a healthy and proper attitude unless you understand the principle. Whenever I do an action, the moment I perform the action, it becomes part of the universe. Once the *karma* has become part of the universe, all the universal laws will act upon the *karma*. Everything in the creation is acted upon by the laws of the universe. The moment I drop something from my hand, immediately the law of gravitation takes over and makes the object fall to earth. Similarly I perform an action, the universal laws take over, process the *karma* that is the *phala*. So every *karma* gives rise to *karma phala*. Scriptures point out that all the universal laws are tools in the hands of the Lord to maintain the harmony of creation. Therefore when I say the laws are processing your *karma*, that means God's hands are at play. *Karma*-s go to God for processing and comes back from Him as the *karma phala*. The moment you know this fact, every *karma* becomes *Īśvara arpaṇam*. For a *karma yogi*, every action is a dedication to God. This is called *Īśvarārpaṇa bhāva*, attitude of dedication to God, born out of awareness. When I perform an action with *Īśvarārpaṇa buddhi* and when I receive the *karma phala*, I do not call it *phala*, but I look at it as *Īśvara prasāda*. Therefore it is sacred, it cannot be rejected, it cannot be criticized. It should be received with a sense of fulfillment. This is *prasāda bhāva*. While working you have *Īśvarārpaṇa buddhi* and when results come have *prasāda buddhi*. This is *karma yoga*. With this attitude I enjoy *śamatvam*, equanimity of mind. I am enthusiastic in every action and at the same time balanced in every result. Every action is an offering to the Lord. Every result is his blessing. *Śamatva bhāvana* is the result of *karma yoga*. This leads to a very very fast spiritual growth. We call that *citta śuddhi*, purity of mind. We will see about *citta śuddhi* in greater detail later. For now simply put, all the problems in my life are not caused by the world, but caused by my wrong handling of the world because of my ignorance. So the ignorant I handles the world wrongly. Therefore I suffer. If I become the wise I, then I know how to handle the world, the world becomes a play ground for me to enjoy!