

Chapter XVII

Remembering God at death; 2 types of liberation; 4 roads to moksha; auspicious times to pass away.

☪☪ Whoever is busy with no other thoughts than those about Me, whoever is ever remembering Me, that person certainly will release their dying breath through the centre of the head; that person will attain Me. I am as near to people as they are to Me. My dear Arjuna! How can I forget the one who never forgets Me? Forgetting is a human frailty, not a characteristic of God, let Me tell you! There is no need for *yoga* or spiritual exercise or even wisdom. It does not matter whether you give these up because you are too weak or whether, in spite of having the strength, you do not feel like struggling to master these. I don't ask for *yoga* or spiritual exercise; I ask only that your mind be fixed on Me. Devote your mind to Me, dedicate it to Me, that is all I ask for.

“If a spiritual aspirant cannot do at least this act of dedication to the Lord, I wonder what their spiritual discipline is capable of! If you plead that you don't have the strength of mind, I ask where the strength comes from to dedicate yourself as you do now to hollow ideals, the vain fantasies of family, fortune, and fame. Can't you direct this strength for that supreme dedication? People easily offer their all to poisonous objective pleasures, but they squirm and protest as if a mountain is tumbling on them when the call is made to dedicate their thoughts, feelings, and acts to the Almighty!

“In their eyes, salvation is as cheap and easy to attain as greens in the vegetable market! They seek to escape from bondage as easily as that. They do not yearn much, but they desire to earn much in the spiritual field! They are sunk more in dullness (*thamas*) than in spiritual penance (*tapas*). But they wish for the fruits that only spiritual penance can offer.

“Those prompted by genuine desire for the fruit must overcome all obstacles and temptations, doubts and disappointments, and dwell on the thought of the Lord. Then, the Lord will not keep apart; He will confer on that aspirant the status of sameness, described as ‘I am divine, You are I, We are one (*aham Brahmasmi*)’. And, the aspirant will be contemplating this unity without a break.”

Then Arjuna asked, “You say that this thinking only of the Supreme Spirit, this one-pointed devotion, is quite easy and that there is no need to take any greater trouble. You also declare that, for those who have acquired it, You are readily attainable. Well, what exactly is the benefit of attaining you?”

Krishna smiled at this and replied, “Arjuna! What greater benefit is there than that? That holy victory makes a mortal a great soul (*mahatma*). You may still pose the question: Of what benefit is it to become a great soul? Listen. The great soul is far superior to the ordinary person. The latter is established in the body and the soul (*jiva*); the latter identifies with the body and with breath, with the particular, ‘the wave’. So, the ordinary person is tossed about by joy and grief and rises or falls with each experience. Between snatches of calm and storm, the ordinary person reels under many a blow.

“The great soul is free from all dual experience, is above and beyond. The great soul has released itself from identity with the particularized and is in the Universal, the Eternal, the Changeless, absorbed in *Brahman*, not the body. The great soul knows that the *Atma* is not a limited entity and feels that it extends beyond all limits. The great soul is free from the blemish of dullness (*thamas*) and passion (*rajas*) and is neither dull nor driven about

by desire; the great soul's pure consciousness is unaffected by attachment or hate. Many who style themselves as such, nowadays, have no purity in their hearts; their consciousness is soiled by foulness. But the pure in heart have no further birth and death. They are under no obligation to appear again on earth. Without attaining that purity, you cannot escape the round of birth and death, however many your meritorious deeds, however high your spiritual status, however glorious the heaven you have secured! Only those who are perpetually absorbed in *Brahman* can attain this timeless Me and be freed from the chain by merging in Me."

At this, Arjuna gave expression to another doubt that worried him. He asked, "If that is so, why do the *Upanishads* declare that those who reach heaven need not be born again? Please clarify exactly who is freed from this cycle of birth and death."

"Arjuna! Two types of liberation are mentioned in the *Upanishads*: liberation on the spot (*sadyomukthi*) and liberation by stages (*krama-mukthi*). Liberation on the spot is also referred to as absolute unity with the Supreme Spirit (*kaivalya-mukthi*). For earning this, no one need aspire to any heaven. They get this on the spot and not by stages, step by step. Liberation secured thus is a possession forever. Only those who attain absolute liberation (*kaivalya*) merge and become one with the Eternal, the Universal.

"The other kind of liberation is liable to change. When the effect of the acquired merit wears out, heaven has to be given up, and life on earth starts anew. Such souls know no merging."

"That is to say," intercepted Arjuna, "the souls that attain absolute unity, liberation, are destroyed, right? Or is there any difference between merging (*laya*) and destruction (*naasa*)?"

"No, Partha! Merging is not destruction. Merging happens when it becomes invisible."

"That is what happens when a thing is destroyed; it becomes invisible, we cannot see it any more."

"But just because a thing is out of sight, how can you pronounce it 'destroyed'? No. A lump of sugar or salt disappears when placed in water. You see it no more, but can you say it has been destroyed? Or, do you say it has merged? It is there, the taste declares it. It has lost the form, but it is present as its quality (*guna*). The soul also merges like this in *Brahman*. It is not destroyed at all. When the soul is not merged like this, it can at best only wander between heaven and earth, deserving life in heaven for some time and descending again to earth for further effort toward salvation."

Arjuna, still afflicted with doubt, asked, "Krishna! you say that no heaven, even the highest region of *Brahman*, can save people from the cycle of birth and death. Then what is the royal road to salvation? Do you mean to say that those who strive for those heavens have to satisfy themselves with just that and no more?"

Krishna answered, "Partha! There is a State that knows no decline, beyond all these heavens. There are many roads by which that State can be won. Unaware of these roads or of the joy of that State, people are taking to others that are either crooked or comfortable. They don't know how to distinguish between the right road and the wrong.

"I may tell you that four roads are now used by mankind: (1) beyond or unaffected by action (*karma-atheetha*); (2) action without any desire for the fruit thereof, unaffected by any craving for the result therefrom (*nish-kama-karma*); (3) action with ambition to reap and enjoy its fruit (*sakama-karma*); and (4) action that knows no restraint or control (*karma-brashta*).

"Those beyond action (*karma*) are liberated while alive (are *jivan-mukthas*), all their actions have been

burned up by the fire of wisdom; their impulses for action have been scorched by the wisdom they have gained. They have no further need for injunctions and prohibitions. They need no spiritual exercise like charity, virtuous living, or austerity. All that they do or feel or think will be divine, holy, virtuous, beneficial to mankind. The very earth they tread on is sacrosanct; every word they utter will be the word of God; on death, their breath need not take them to realms that are heavenly; on the falling away of the bodily raiment, they merge without delay in *Brahman*. Such are the souls who were described by Me now as having absolute liberation, attainment of *Brahman*, or instant liberation.

“Next, the second group, who do action without desire for the fruit. These are the seekers of liberation (*mumukshus*), alert on the path of liberation and intent on attaining it. They perform each act as a step in the realization of the Lord. So they can never do anything bad; they do not look forward to the result; they leave it to the Lord to give it or withhold it. They are not prompted by worldly motives or even by the desire to gain heavenly pleasure. Their aim is just this: liberation from the bondage of the objective world. They win the grace of the Lord in proportion to the steadiness of their faith and practice.

“The third group performs all acts through the desire for the fruit thereof. Since they have an eye on the successful earning of the fruit, they will engage themselves only in acts that are approved by the scriptures; they will not do any sinful or prohibited act. They will equate each act with the merit it will confer, the happiness it will ensure, the heaven it will win. Such people, when they depart from this world, will enter the supra-mundane worlds, for which they have sought and worked; and, having stayed there as long as their merit entitles them, they have to return to earth.

“The fourth group is not guided by any rule of conduct. They have no norms, no discrimination between virtue and vice, right and wrong, proper and improper. They have no horror of hell, no conception of heaven, no dread of the devil, no reverence for God, no respect for the scriptures, no vision of *dharma*! They are best pictured as beasts in human form. The majority of humans are members of this unfortunate group. They strive for momentary pleasure, short-lived happiness, temporary joy, and evanescent comfort. To call them apes with human physique would be a big mistake, for the ape only jumps from branch to branch or from tree to tree. It releases itself from one branch or tree before landing on another. People are more like caterpillars, which move from leaf to leaf, fixing their foreparts on a new leaf, before releasing their hind parts from the leaf on which they were resting until then.

“That is to say, by their acts in this life, people decide on their next birth, where and how it will be, even before leaving this world. The new place is ready for them; their foreparts are already there. It is only after settling this that they relieve themselves of the hold on this world! Such people move round in the wheel of birth and death.

“To be born and to die, one must have auspicious moments that will guarantee a wise life and a worthwhile end, Arjuna! *Yogis*, for example, give up life only at auspicious moments, not at other times. That is why people say, ‘death is the witness for the good.’ An auspicious moment is to be chosen even for the act of death.”

Arjuna asked, “Krishna! Tell me when the body has to be yielded to death in order to escape the cycle of birth and death; tell me also the period of time to avoid.”

Krishna replied, “Partha! your question is very timely and urgent. Sometimes, you make Me marvel at your intelligence and make Me very happy. At other times, you make Me laugh at your ignorance. Your egotism and

sense of attachment cause this confusion. Let that pass. Let us come to your question.

“The *yogis* who practise action without desire for the fruit pass away in splendour (*tejas*) during the day, while there is light, in the bright half of the month and in the six-month period of the northward path of the sun (*uttarayana*). They have fire as their first state. Hence, their path is known as the path of the gods or, since fire is known also as *archi* in the *Vedas*, as the path beginning with fire or the Sun’s rays (*archi-radi-marga*). Such *yogis* emerge from effulgence (*prakasa*) and, traveling through effulgence, merge in effulgence itself. They attain *Brahman* and are not born again.

“The *yogis* who practise action with an eye on the fruit pass away in smoke (*dhuma*) at night, during the dark half of the month, during the six months of the southward path of the sun (*dakshina-ayana*). They go along the path beginning with smoke (*dhuma-adi-marga*), reach heaven, and there enjoy the pleasures they have yearned and worked for. When the stock of merit is exhausted, they get born again.

“Both these categories are called *yogis*; they will exist as long as aspirants and active progressive individuals exist in the world.

“Here, a doubt may reasonably arise: Why is the bright half of the month auspicious while the dark half is not? What, again, happens to those who die when it is neither bright nor dark, neither day nor night? This is a legitimate doubt, and everyone has a right to know the answer.

“Now, you must first understand what is meant by the bright fortnight (*sukla-paksha*). It is the half-month when the light of the moon increases day by day. But what is the relationship of the light of the moon to a person and their death? The moon is the symbol of the mind of people. ‘Out of the mind was the moon born (*chandra-maa-manaso jaathah*).’ Therefore, the bright half of the moon signifies the progress of the mind spiritually, in divine discipline, and the full-moon signifies the fullness of that achievement. Thus, the bright half is the period when spiritual progress is attained. For the body, the visible moon; for the mind, the symbolic moon-deity presiding over the mind! The increasing splendour of the mind due to the increasing realization of one’s own divinity is what is meant by the word ‘bright half (*sukla-paksha*)’.

“And what of the six months during which the sun travels north (*uttarayana*)? Be free from doubt on that score, too. Worship offered knowing the meaning of every rite and spiritual disciplines practised knowing the implications of every step—these cleanse the heart more effectively and loosen the chains of doubt.

“The time of the northward path of the sun is the period when no dot of cloud or whiff of fog contaminates the vast dome and the sun shines in all His glory. This is the gross meaning, but there is a subtle one, too. The heart is the inner sky. There, the sun that shines is intelligence (*buddhi*). When the clouds of ignorance, the fog of egotism, and the smoke of attachment hover in that inner sky, the sun of intelligence is hidden and things look murky and are mistaken. The time of the northward movement of the sun of the heart is when the inner sky is clear of all these and when the sun shines in full splendour. You must have heard the expression ‘the sun of wisdom (*jnana-bhaskara*)’. The sun is always associated with wisdom and intelligence. When people pass away with this equipment of the effulgent sun of wisdom in their clear heart, they can certainly escape re-birth! They take the path of fire (*archi-radi-marga*), as said already, and merge in *Brahman*!

“Those who pass away in the other half of the year, during the southward path of the sun, have the opposite destiny; then the heart is beset with smoke and fog and cloud. The sun is hidden, and His effulgence has no splendour. And, in the dark half of the month, the moon wanes, symbolizing the waning of Godward thoughts.

The newmoon night is enveloped in complete darkness, and all spiritual impulses suffer defeat. The thick smoke of ignorance lies heavily on the mind. This is the meaning of the expression ‘dark half (*krishna-paksha*)’. Those who die at such an inauspicious time reap an inauspicious result.”