

18. Activity and Action

The countries of the world fall into two categories—Karma-bhoomi and *Bhoga-bhoomi*—countries where the people are devoted to activities with spiritual motivation and countries where the people pursue the pathways of the senses, with no higher purpose to guide them. The categories emphasise the ideals of the people, down the ages. Bharath or India is the Karma-bhoomi, where the people have discovered the proper goal of all activity, namely the glorification of God, resident within and without.

Karma is inevitable. It is immanent in every thought. It is of two kinds: Material and Spiritual, *Loukik* (connected with this world) and *Vaidik* (drawn from the Vedas or scriptural injunctions). Karma that merely sustains life is material. The Vaidik that elevates the human into the Divine is based on either the Vedas or on later texts like the Sastras or the Smrithi. They can be any of the three: mental, emotional

or physical. They are also determined by the activities which the individual has adopted either in previous lives or in this. The consequences of acts done in past lives that are affecting this life are called *Praarabdha*. The Karma that one is engaged in now which is bound to affect the future is called *Aagaami*. The stored Karma that is slowly being worked out by the individual in life after life is called *Sanchitha*.

The Sruthi and the Smrithi texts 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 his reason can unravel.

Karma subsumes every activity of man—worldly, scriptural, the spiritual. All the 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, so long as air is breathed in and breathed 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, hardens into “earth” (ground, soil). The earth produces and fosters plants and trees, which feed and foster man and keep him hale and hearty. These plants give the grain that man lives upon, and the seminal fluid that produces progeny is the gift of the grain. Thus is the Karma of creation effected and continued. This is how the Smrithi summarises the process.

In short, Karma is observable here as movement, as progress, as evolution and as hereditary effect.

It is only natural and reasonable to expect that this vast flow, this constant movement must have something fixed and unmoving as base and support. This is exactly what is posited as Atma or Parabrahma. The very first vibratory movement on that base happened when Parabrahma became Parameswara and expressed the three thirsts for Jnana (Wisdom), *Ichha* (Wish) and *Kriya* (Will). That very movement was known as the primordial Karma, the Karma of Being, transforming itself into Becoming, the Karma of *Srshti* (creation).

It is the importance of Karma that necessitated the triple aspects of Divinity, Brahma (who causes creation), Vishnu (who supports and sustains) and Maheswara (who dissolves and destroys). It is the Law of Karma that rules the motion

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 into the time or space when Karma was not. What, why, when and how events do happen is beyond the capacity of man to predict with accuracy. They are laid down from eternity to eternity.]

Just as a work being done or an activity which is engaging one, can be referred to as Karma, no work being done and no activity being engaged in, are also Karma! On seeing a person silent and calm, sitting quiet and doing nothing, we infer that he is free from activity. How, then, can he be described as doing Karma? What is meant by saying, “He is not doing any work.” “He is not engaged in any activity”? That statement only means that “He is engaged in keeping himself away from any work or activity.” So, it can be affirmed that men sometimes are busy doing work and sometimes busy with keeping work away from their attention. That is to say, they are engaged in Karma as well as *Akarma*. If he is not engrossed or attached with the Karma he does, and is engaged in it as his duty, as his way of worship; and if he is not attached to the fruit of his action, then he can practise *Akarma* even in Karma. This is the highest sadhana.

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 man but every living organism is evidence of this great marvel. Doubts may be raised. “How can anything happen to man without his knowledge or without his resolution?” It is best to answer this doubt by confessing that man cannot 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.

When we reflect on the fact that yogis exercise their will and stop their pulse-beats and their inhaling-exhaling process, we realise the power of Will in inducing Karma. Karma we can infer, is not something hanging loose in mid-air! Unless we become doers, deeds do not emanate. “*Na jaathi icchathi jethathe*,” says the axiom in the *Nyayasastra*. “As one knows, so one wishes; as one wishes, so one acts.” The Vedantha Sutras also proclaim the same truth. “*Yad dhyathi, tad icchathi*” (That on which attention rests, that is the thing wished for). “*Yad icchatthi, tad karothe*” (That on which the wish rests, that is the thing for which deeds are done). “*Yad Karothe, tad bhavathi*” (That for which deeds are done, that is what becomes).

The manifest nature of the individual is moulded by desire. He shapes himself in line with his hopes, aspirations, attempts and achievements. Even his own future life is designed by him through his decisions and deeds. The force that his “reason” exerts on him and which directs his will in specific directions is known as Prakriti, or “Nature.” 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 “Prakriti.”

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 the reason why 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 karma, and so it has happened that some have labelled 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 karma and knows it only as reflected in worldly, material activities. This view is adopted and emphasised 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—these are conscious of the activities which 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 each one does not fill his assignment 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.

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 nectareous advice of the Lord. This advice 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 and 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 pastmasters 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, counselled 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 in the Kshatriya caste; that caste is entrusted by social norms with the 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. Man is bound to the inclinations implanted in him by Nature. Again, consider this. Man has to be ever involved in some activity or other. He cannot live without it even for a moment. Therefore, it is best you act now, in accordance with the inclination and skill impressed on you by your ancestry and heredity.” This is the lesson taught to him, the *Kula-Dharma*, 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 too can be said to involve only worldly material “work.” This type of work is important for living, and happy living here is a preparation for spiritual advancement in the hereafter. The more faulty one’s activities in his worldly pursuits, the less success will be for the individual, the society and the nation. There can be no two opinions on these points. Nevertheless, men do not exert as efficiently and as enthusiastically for spiritual advancement, as they do for worldly success and fame. This is indeed a pity.