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Nishkama Karma

*Can one who longs for a position of
authority be of pure heart?
It is only when the servant of the nation
becomes its leader that he can render
selfless service.*

Embodiments of the Divine Atma!

Bharath is the country which has rightly understood the secret of *karma* and has thereby come to be called *Karmakshetra*, the land of action. Work done in cognition of the *Atma* gives protection to life. Such *karma* broadens the heart and illumines the individual. It annihilates the ego and confers the bliss of the Self on man. To recognise this sanctity of *karma*, we should purify our hearts. *Karma* flows incessantly like a river. All creation, sentient, and insentient, is immersed in it.

The word *karma* may appear to be small, but its meaning is profound. It is not possible to define *karma*. It has neither beginning nor end. Just as life is beginningless, *karma* too is without beginning. Thus, the nature of *karma* is shrouded in mystery and in trying to comprehend its significance, one must be earnest and steadfast. In common parlance, it is natural to regard the performance of an action as *karma*. But, this is not correct. For example, to the question as to what someone is doing, we get the answer that he is writing. Here writing is considered *karma*. Similarly, when the same question is asked about someone else, we get the reply that he is not doing anything and is merely watching. Watching is as much an action as writing is. So, too, sleeping and contemplation involve *karma*. As long as there is life-breath in man, he cannot desist from *karma*. In fact, the very process of inhalation and exhalation is *karma*. There is no need to put in any special effort for work such as this. Likewise, there is little of true effort required in several other activities in our daily routine from morning to night.

Nevertheless, all these activities form an integral part of human life and cannot be described as spiritual endeavour. Instead, we should undertake today what is known as *nishkama karma*, or action performed without any desire for the fruit thereof. Service of the downtrodden, the disabled and the diseased also constitutes an obligation in one's daily life and cannot

be described as being *nishkama karma* or motiveless work. This is because man's love for the universe is not without selfishness. If man loves any object, he does so for his own sake and pleasure. Similarly, if a man conceals an object in a secure place, it is not on account of his love for the object but because of his love for himself. Thus, in the world, all kinds of love are born of love for oneself and not out of love for others. It is the primary duty of the members of the *Seva Dal* to give up the thought of the utility of an act of service to one's own self and consider service for the benefit of others alone as being truly selfless in character.

Man can be described as a conglomeration of thoughts and ideas. Every little thought becomes an integral part of his life. The quality of feelings one has, determines his future. Therefore, he must install sacred ideas in his heart. The fostering of pure thoughts will promote the spirit of selfless service in our hearts. *Nishkama karma* uproots the bestiality in man and confers divinity on him. Selfless service is a more exalted means of spiritual progress than such other ways as meditation, *bhajan* and *yoga*. This is so because when we undertake meditation, *japa*, or *yoga*, we do so for our own benefit and not for the good of others. These are aimed at subjugating one's individual desires and securing happiness for oneself. What we should aspire for is the attainment of the good of others without any desire for personal gain.

Nishkama karma, or selfless service, is the fragrant flower of altruistic love. It is not to be performed for the satisfaction of the person rendering the service or the person at whose bidding it is done. Man should regard *nishkama karma* as the purpose for which he is given life. This feeling should flow through his very nerves and bloodstream and permeate every cell of his body. Whatever be the work we do, we should do it as an offering to God and for His pleasure. Members and office-bearers of the Sathya Sai *Seva Dal* should not feel obliged to do service on the ground that the rules and regulations require them to do so. They should not look upon the regulations as compelling them to do service. Without being regimented by rules and regulations, we should take up service activities for the purification of our own hearts.

On the emblem of the *Seva Dal* is inscribed “Duty is God.” Man is using the expression “duty” so often and in so many different contexts without realising its inner significance. The word “duty” would have no meaning at all if there were only one individual. It assumes significance only if there is a society or a community, or at least two persons. Here we should understand two aspects closely related to “duty.” These may be termed “individual freedom” and “fundamental right.” “Individual freedom” refers to the freedom an individual has, whereas “fundamental right” brings into

focus his relation to society. Man must endeavour to ensure that there is proper balance between the two.

All your life is spent in the company of others in the society. You are not independent by yourself. Without any kind of relationship to a community, to relatives and to other individuals, it is not possible for you to live in seclusion, all by yourself. Since it is not possible to live in absolute isolation, our lives are inevitably full of connection with others around us. It is in this context that the *Seva Dal* volunteers, realising their duty to society to which they owe their existence, must remember that life is bestowed on man not for personal profits but for communal good.

There is yet another dimension attached to the meaning of this word “duty.” We should seek only that kind of liberty which does not obstruct the freedom of others. Should you hamper the independence of another individual in the course of an egotistic display of your individual freedom, you are sure to be condemned by society. The man next to you enjoys the same amount of licence that your own individual freedom affords you. There is a small example to illustrate this: trying to make the most of your own individual freedom, you may gaily stroll down the road, wielding a large stick in your hand. Yet, a man coming from the opposite direction has just as much freedom to dodge the stick as you have to wield it. If you behave in a manner which impairs the freedom of another, you stand to receive societal

disapproval or governmental censure. Thus, what we understand by the word “duty” is that the privileges and the rights enjoyed by us on account of our individual freedom, are also claimed by others who are around us. The right to walk freely does not allow you to roam about recklessly in a village as you might in a forest. A hundred percent freedom cannot be the prerogative of any individual bound to society, whether it is the Prime Minister or the President.

Even the monarch of a large kingdom cannot fulfil all his individual wishes. He cannot, merely by virtue of his being the King, behave in any manner that he fancies. The kings have some codes of conduct and discipline, which they must adhere to. Just as the ruler of a petty earthly domain has certain norms to go by in carrying out his duty, the Supreme Ruler of the world, the Almighty, too, does have such regulations in the matter of the governance of the universe.

It is puerile to say that God would do everything by Himself simply because He is omnipotent. Here is an illustration. There are two individuals who are devotees of the Lord. One of them prays to God for rain to prevent his crops from getting dried up. The other, however, prays to Him for the absence of rainfall for a few days in view of a grand marriage ceremony he had intended to perform in his house shortly. Thus, they put the Lord in a dilemma. Which devotee’s prayer should God answer? Here, we should ask ourselves the question

as to whether God has received these prayers Himself directly or not. Even as there is a delegation of authority in the administration of a terrestrial kingdom by a ruler, by which various governmental functions are performed by several ministers who are assigned the charge of certain departments and portfolios, in running the affairs of the Cosmos, the Almighty God, too, assigns certain functions to certain gods like Indra, Varuna, and Rudra. Just as all earthly matters are not taken directly to a king, but are presented to the concerned ministers for action, all prayers of man do not reach God Himself—they are attended to by His “ministers”, Indra, Varuna and others. Only those prayers which have their origins in the spirit of *nishkama karma*, infinite and pure love and an unsullied heart, reach the Lord directly. It is not possible for prayers of any other kind to reach Him directly. Therefore, it is only through these three media, that is, *nishkama karma*, boundless love, and an unsullied heart, that we can hope to secure direct contact with the Lord and obtain His Divine sanction to our request.

Even among these three, *nishkama karma* is very important and therefore the members of the *Seva Dal* should participate in service activities without indulging in selfish pursuits. To call ourselves Sathya Sai *Seva Dal* Volunteers and have selfish interests as an end would amount to an attempt to deceive God. Your actions should be in consonance with the name associated with the institution.

A few minutes earlier you had heard Gokak say something about *manishi*. This word, when slightly mispronounced, would be heard as *mahishi* or something arising out of *maheswara*. By its association in terms of the sounds of these words, the word *maharishi* also presents itself to us as a *manishi* (ordinary man) and gets transformed into a *maharishi* (sage) by engaging in *nishkama karma*. Truly speaking, the merit that could be obtained from service cannot be acquired even from the practice of rigorous austerities. Service brings human beings closer to each other and promotes affection and friendship. Without this friendship and feeling of love for one's fellowmen, one cannot hope to attain intimacy with the Lord (*sneham*) which among the nine forms of devotion to God is next only to *Atmanivedanam* (complete surrender).

You may be thinking in this context that you are living as brothers in keeping with the laudable ideal of "Brotherhood of man and Fatherhood of God." There is, however, a higher ideal that is to be sought after, for it is not uncommon to observe brothers quarrelling with one another and totally severing their connections. "*Ekam sat viprah bahudha vadanthi*"—the one truth is spoken of in different ways by the wise. "*Ekoham bahusyam*," I am One; let Me be many. "*Ekam eva advitiam Brahma*," Brahman is only One, without a second. "*Easwara sarva bhootanam*"—God is in all beings. "*Isavasyam idam sarvam*"—The entire world

is enveloped by the Lord. This is the inner meaning of these *Upanishadic* declarations—behind the apparent physical differences, the one basic Truth, the Atma, resides in all beings. We should, therefore, live our lives with a constant awareness of this profound verity. Do not feel elated by injuring and hurting others, for that harm is not being caused to another but to your own self. In the same way, whatever be the benefit which arises out of the good deeds you may perform, it accrues to you and not to others.

Here is an illustration to explain that the good deeds do bring back good to oneself. Three cups of coffee were prepared in a home. The husband drank one cup and the wife, another. While they were debating as to whether they should share the third cup or let one of them have it, a friend called at the house and was cordially offered the coffee. The husband felt pleased that he had not only averted a quarrel with his wife but also performed the service of offering coffee to his friend. Three months later, the husband visited his friend's house. The friend extended due hospitality and offered him a cup of coffee, reciprocating the favour he had received earlier. Had he not been given the cup of coffee three months earlier, he would not have returned the hospitality. So, we see that the householder got back his cup of coffee after three months. In the same manner, we are repaid for our deeds in some way or the other, whether we know it or not, and in the same coin.

The *Bhagavad Gita* has proclaimed the path of *nishkama karma* as the royal road to perfection. It exhorts man not to crave for the fruits of action and merely perform one's duties in a detached manner, leaving the results thereof to the Lord. God does not enjoin man to do any work in particular. He is only the dispenser of the results of the deeds done by humans. He gives the fruits of actions according to the kind of work performed by man. If, without performing good deeds, you pray for personal gain, God merely listens to your entreaties, but does not favour you with His benediction. A story from the *Mahabharatha* portrays this succinctly. On an occasion, during the celebrations associated with the Sankranti festival, Krishna was partaking of the freshly harvested sugarcane offered to Him by the *gopis* in accordance with the custom. As there were no machines those days, to squeeze the juice out of the sugarcane, Krishna had to cut it. While doing so, He inadvertently cut his little finger. Seeing blood on His finger, Sathyabhama, in her characteristic ego, ordered the *gopis* to go inside the house and fetch some cloth to bandage the finger. Draupadi who was also there, however, out of her love and concern for Krishna, immediately tore off a piece of cloth from the end of her *sari* and bandaged the Lord's finger.

Years later, when Dussasana brought Droupadi to the court of the Kauravas with the intention of humiliating her in public, she appealed to Krishna for

His Divine intervention to save her honour. Krishna pondered over it for a few moments to see whether she deserved to be rescued from her present predicament by virtue of any related good deed done by her in the past, which could be recompensed. Only help offered earlier entitles one to assistance from God. However, it is not as if any good deed done in the past would bring Divine aid in a particular situation. There must be a cognate association of the deed performed by man with the aid sought from the Divine. An ointment for the eye cannot cure the headache. After a little deliberation, Krishna remembered that the tying of a bandage, improvised by her, at one time in the past, entitled her to receive a similar gift. Therefore, He sent her an endless *sari* with the same little finger that had needed a bandage then. *Karmanyeva adhikaraste*—we must concern ourselves only with the action to be performed by us; the Lord will bestow on us the fruits thereof when the need arises.

Gokak has said earlier that Swami is the greatest volunteer and the greatest *Seva Dal* leader. You should follow Swami, the leader. This is because from morning to night, Swami performs even the smallest task Himself; and all His work is for the good of the world. It is in this context that I often say, "My Life is My Message." God and the voice of God are one and the same. Thus, doing what Swami does, as well as what Swami ordains, forms work which pleases Him. Work

done without the thought of self and eschewing the craving for name or power pleases Him most.

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