

BHAGAVAD GITA

The Global Dharma for the Third Millennium

Chapter Four

Translations and commentaries
compiled by Parama Karuna Devi

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Chapter 4. Jnana yoga

After clarifying the difference between the temporary material body and the eternal Atman, Krishna continues to answer Arjuna's questions.

In the last chapter he explained the concept of duty, and of actual renunciation that consists in performing one's prescribed duty selflessly, without being greedy to enjoy the results of one's actions. He introduced the concept of sacrifice, or the action of performing one's duties as a sacred offering to the Supreme, and explained how the various religious activities are meant for the progress of the individual and not only for the benefit of society and the universe at large.

In this chapter, Krishna explains that this knowledge of sacred action (*jnana*) is the first step towards the realization of Self and the transcendently conscious way of life called Yoga. The progressive way to act in this world is not just about "doing one's duty", but it is about the evolution of the consciousness: without the proper awareness, the action only carries a fraction of its value, and the individual will not develop his full potential.

This is the reason why people feel frustrated and unhappy when they are engaged unwillingly in activities that they feel as mechanical and non-beneficial for their own evolution and for the welfare and progress of the universe.

On the other hand, those who feel that their work is constructive and beneficial both for themselves and the community, are happier also in the other areas of their life. The more one grows, the larger is the horizon he becomes able to contemplate: at first he can see

only his own benefit, then he expands that field to the people he loves - family, community, nation - and as he opens his mind to the greater reality, he starts to connect with all life and consciousness.

Selfishness is distempered into selflessness when the mind overcomes the illusion of duality, and sees that all life is one: at this level, the human being becomes an active player in the plan of God, a co-worker with the Devas that control, nurture and protect the universe, and his consciousness becomes divine. This was illustrated in the "wheel of reciprocation" of which Krishna spoke in verses 3.11 to 3.16. But there is more to this development of consciousness than simply becoming cooperative with the Divine: by engaging selflessly in sacred action, one approaches the Supreme Reality that is even above and beyond the level of the Devas, the Supreme Personality of Godhead that is called Krishna, the Supreme Consciousness, that is truly perfect in eternity, knowledge and happiness.

All those who can't make out the meaning of life and find only loss, pain and despair in the world, are suffering unnecessarily, and only because they are getting everything backwards, out of ignorance: they don't know how the world is supposed to function, and how they are supposed to function as persons. Thus they keep running in the wrong direction, after the projection of their basic needs - permanence, knowledge, bliss - distancing themselves further and further from the Reality they aspire to. The pursuit of happiness is a very legitimate quest, but what if we are going in the wrong direction?

Do we know what happiness is? Would we be able to recognize it when we see it? This is why people need teachers: they need to get the proper directions from those who have already found the happiness that is accompanied by awareness and consciousness, and is not lost in the ups and downs of the ocean of material existence.

A qualified teacher is one who has the direct and complete vision of Reality and can train us to attain the same level. This knowledge is eternal, and every time it becomes forgotten, God descends into the world to re-establish it. So we can find it in the Guru (the teacher and guide), in the Shastra (the genuine scriptures) and in the Sadhus (good people).

The power of transcendental knowledge gives a deeper meaning to all activities - including the occupational duties of the traditional *varnashrama* system and to the performance of the different modalities of *yajnas*, that culminate with the development of knowledge and awareness.

In this chapter, Krishna begins to reveal his supreme transcendental position, opening the path of Bhakti yoga, devotional service to God, as the genuine path to Self realization. By understanding the spiritual nature of God and his activities, one can achieve liberation from material conditionings and unite with God.

VERSE 1

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

śrībhagavānuvāca ।

इमं विवस्वते योगं प्रोक्तवानहमव्ययम् ।

imaṁ vivasvate yogam proktavānahamavyayam ।

विवस्वान्मनवे प्राह मनुरिक्ष्वाकवेऽब्रवीत् ॥ ४-१ ॥

vivasvānmanave prāha manurikṣvākave'bravit ॥ 4-1 ॥

sri: wonderful; *bhagavan:* Lord; *uvaca:* said; *imam:* this; *vivasvate:* to Vivasvan (Surya); *yogam:* Yoga; *proktavan:* instructed; *aham:* I; *avyayam:* eternal; *vivasvan:* Vivasvan; *manave:* to Manu; *praha:* told; *manuh:* Manu; *ikshvakave:* to Ikshvaku; *abravit:* told.

The Lord said:

"I have explained this eternal (science of) Yoga to Vivasvan, and Vivasvan taught it to Manu, and Manu told it to Ikshvaku."

In another passage of the *Mahabharata* (*Santi parva*, 348.51-52), it is said that at the beginning of the Treta yuga, Vivasvan instructed Manu, who in turn instructed his son Ikshvaku for the benefit of all the people. However, this knowledge (*yogam*) is eternal (*avyayam*) and did not originate at that particular time. Nobody "invented" Yoga: it is rather the original blue-print for life, therefore exists eternally even before the creation of the universe. Another meaning of *avyayam*, "imperishable", indicates that the practice of Yoga brings eternal and permanent results.

Vivasvan is another name for Surya. At the beginning of creation, Brahma generated from his mind the Rishi Marici, who generated Rishi Kashyapa from his wife Dakshayani. In turn, Kashyapa generated the 12 Adityas (“sons of Aditi”), including Surya.

Surya is the father of Sraddha Manu (also called Vaivasvata or “son of Vivasvan”, born from Surya’s wife Samjna), the seventh Manu in the day of Brahma. This Vaivasvata Manu was formerly King Satyavrata, the ruler of Dravida, and had a central role in the story of the *avatara* of Vishnu called Matsya (fish) being saved by him from the Great Flood that saw the end of the reign of the previous Manu.

The ten sons of Vaivasvata Manu were:

1. Ikshvaku: he had 100 sons, who populated and ruled the entire earth. The eldest were Vikukshi, Nimi and Dandaka. Vikukshi was banned from the kingdom because he violated the Vedic rules, but was readmitted after atoning. He performed many *yajnas* and had a long dynasty. His son Puranjaya was also called Indravaha because he convinced Indra to become his bull carrier while he fought against the Asuras on behalf of the Devas. His descendant Mandhata became the emperor of the entire planet consisting of the seven continents (*sapta dvipa*) and had 3 sons (including Purukutsa who married the Nagini Narmada, and Muchukunda) and 50 daughters, who all married Saubhari Muni. Among the descendants of Purukutsa, Trishanku (for whom Visvamitra performed the famous sacrifice), Sagara (whose *asvamedha* horse was stolen by Indra), Bhagiratha (who brought Ganga to earth), and Mitrasaha (who became a *rakshasa*). As he could not have children, Mitrasaha asked Vasistha to generate a son with his wife Madayanti, whose descendant Balika survived the slaughter of the *kshatriyas* by Parasurama. His descendant Khatvanga became the ancestor of Raghu, the ancestor of the *avatara* Ramachandra.

2. Nriga, who was transformed into a lizard due to a curse and was delivered by Krishna many *yugas* later.
3. Saryati, who was very expert in Vedic knowledge and gave instructions about the *yajna* performed by the Angirasas (the sons of Angira). Saryati's daughter Sukanya became the wife of Chyavana Rishi, a descendant of Bhrigu Rishi, who defeated Indra to help the Asvini kumaras to get the *somarasa* during the *yajna*. Saryati had 3 sons: Uttanabarhi, Anarta and Bhurisena. Anarta's son Revata had 100 sons; the eldest, named Kakudmi, gave his daughter Revati to Baladeva as his wife.
4. Dishta, whose son Nabhaga had descendants who became *vaisyas*; however Khaninetra (one of their descendants in the line going through Nabhaga- Bhalandana- Vatsapriti- Pramsu- Pramati- Khanitra- Chakshusha- Vivimsati- Rambha) became a great *kshatriya* king. His descendant Marutta (in the line Khaninetra- Karandhama- Avikshit) became a great emperor, at whose *yajna* celebration Indra became intoxicated by drinking too much *somarasa*. Another great king in the dynasty was Trinabindu, who married the Apsara Alambusha, whose daughter Ilavila became the mother of Kuvera, the Deva of wealth.
5. Dhrishta, whose *kshatriyas* sons the Dharshatas became *brahmanas*,
6. Karushaka, who became the founder of the northern Karusha dynasty,
7. Narishyanta, in whose descendance Agni appeared as Agnivehsya or Jatukarnya Rishi, founder of the *brahmana* dynasty called Agnivesyayana,
8. Prishadhra, who mistakenly killed a cow and retired into penance for the rest of his life as atonement,

9. Nabhaga, whose son Naabhaga obtained the blessings of Shiva Mahadeva and became the father of Maharaja Ambarisha, the great devotee who could not be touched by the curse of the great *brahmana* Durvasa.

10. Kavi, who became a *naishtika brahmachari* and therefore had no children.

All the human beings are descendants of these sons. Vaivasvata Manu also had a daughter called Ila (the first born), who periodically changed into a male called Sudyumna. As a woman, Ila/ Sudyumna married Budha (Mercury), the son of Chandra (the Moon) and had four sons named Pururava, Utkala, Gaya and Vimala.

The fourteen Manus in this day of Brahma are Yajna (Svayambhuva Manu, son of Brahma), Vibhu (Svarocisha Manu), Satyakshena (Uttama Manu), Hari (Tamasa Manu), Vaikuntha (Raivata man), Ajita (Cakshusha Manu), Sradhadeva (Vaivasvata Manu, the current one), Sarvabhauma (Savarni Manu), Rishabha (Daksha savarni Manu), Visvakshena (Brahma savarni Manu), Dharmasetu (Dharma savarni Manu), Sudhama (Rudra savarni Manu), Yogesvara (Deva savarni Manu), Brihadbhanu (Indra savarni Manu).

VERSE 2

एवं परम्पराप्राप्तमिमं राजर्षयो विदुः ।

evam paramparāprāptamimam rājarṣayo viduḥ ।

स कालेनेह महता योगो नष्टः परन्तप ॥ ४-२ ॥

sa kāleneha mahatā yogo naṣṭaḥ parantapa ॥ 4-2 ॥

evam: thus; *param para*: from one to the next; *praptam*: obtained; *imam*: this; *rajarshayah*: by the Raja Rishis; *viduh*: they understood; *sah*: this (knowledge of *yoga*); *kaleneha*: with time; *mahata*: a lot of; *yogah*: (the knowledge of) *yoga*; *nashtah*: destroyed/ lost; *parantapa*: o tormentor of the enemy.

"O Parantapa (Arjuna), in this way the Raja Rishis have learned this (knowledge) in a descending line, but after such a long time (this) Yoga has become lost."

This verse is quoted very often to stress the importance of the disciplic succession in the study of *Gita* and spiritual life in general, accusing those "scholars that are not in the authorized disciplic succession" to give faulty interpretations and to make a good business out of it without actually accepting its instructions.

This is a very good point, but it might be misinterpreted and exploited by other parties, who - in spite of claiming to be "the authorized disciplic succession" (if not "the only authorized" disciplic succession) - are also interested in making a good business out of it without actually accepting and following its genuine and original instructions.

These unqualified followers present themselves as "authorized" not on the basis of their own transcendental realization, knowledge and behaviors, but on the basis of seminal rights (being the sexual descendants of a person who was realized and applied his knowledge into practice) or on the basis of legal or political rights (being the voted representatives of an Organization or having similar or equivalent certification by Government or court).

Such credentials are not sufficient to prove their qualification to the position of teachers: one must actually know and understand the subject he wants to teach, and demonstrate such knowledge and understanding by applying them in his/ her daily life and choices.

This is not guaranteed genetically or politically, and rather we should be wary of the very fact that a person who is supposed to teach us how to transcend material identifications and attachments is presenting his authority as built on the basis of material identifications and attachments.

In fact, here in this verse we find a clear statement to the effect that disciplic successions regularly become lost because of the passing of time, and that when such unfortunate but inevitable thing happens, it is necessary to drop them and to revive the genuine knowledge of Yoga into society by presenting it anew, in the most suitable format of time, place and circumstances.

Some commentators observe that the knowledge of Yoga was lost because it was transmitted to weak and unqualified people who did not have sufficient understanding. This is certainly a good point, but it also needs a deeper examination: we should not content ourselves of some superficial verdict that shifts the blame on "unqualified people", because such lack of qualification is not at all uncommon, especially in Kali yuga.

What to speak of the self-realized *acharyas*, even the spiritual lineages established by Personalities of Godhead such as the direct *avatars* of Vishnu or Shiva, who regularly descend to teach this knowledge to the sincere souls, end up losing their original spirit and intrinsic power: this is precisely the reason why the number of the *avatars* and *acharyas* needs to be unlimited. The actual factor is clearly explained in this verse: the loss of knowledge is inevitable, because of the time factor.

The "great span" of time is relative to the particular season of the universe: in Satya yuga it may refer to thousands of years, while in Kali yuga it may refer to a few decades only, depending on how quickly time changes the circumstances in which people live. Transcendental knowledge is eternal and unchangeable, but every

time it must be presented in a specific way according to the level of development and understanding of the interested people. When circumstances change, it becomes extremely difficult to properly understand the previous presentation, because the cultural references that we use in our daily life play a central role in the application of knowledge.

Each particular situation in time and space is defined by opportunities, problems, issues, limitations, and a course of action that is most suitable for the greatest number of people; sometimes these factors can change so dramatically and drastically that the only proper way to proceed is by reversing the previous direction.

For example, about 5000 years ago Veda Vyasa compiled the scriptures for the people of Kali yuga, and after a relatively short time the situation had already become very degraded, so Buddha appeared to deflect the people's attention away from the Vedic scriptures and the ritualistic ceremonies and direct it to the basics of *dharma*: truthfulness, compassion, purity, self-control, detachment from material identification and enjoyment, simplicity, nonviolence, philosophical search etc - that is precisely the definition of Knowledge as per *Gita* (13.8-12).

After an even shorter time, Buddha's particular presentation of Knowledge became outdated because the problems and issues to be solved in human society had changed considerably; from the position of spiritual revolutionaries, his disciplic succession had become reactionary and effectively obstructed the progress of people. Then Adi Shankara appeared, to re-establish the faith of people in Vedic scriptures and tradition, but in a format that was more suitable to the new circumstances.

Similarly, all the other subsequent *acharyas* from various perspectives (*vaishnava*, *shaiva*, etc) presented the very same eternal Knowledge, but from a particular point of view that was

most suitable for the understanding to the people they were talking to.

This does not mean that we should throw away the books written by ancient teachers, or that we should disrespect the genuine *acharyas* of the past: rather, we need to carefully study their teachings in their original form, and considering the particular historical circumstances when such teachings were expressed.

Some people believe that we can or should continue to utilize the texts of the previous *acharyas* but do some "editing" - modifying or removing what is not relevant and adding whatever may be more relevant today than in the past. This is a big mistake. It is much better, more honest and truthful, to write a new book under one's own responsibility and name than to tamper with the books written by others and use their names to claim some authority for what has been actually written by us.

In fact, here the questionable concept of the absolute value of the seminal or political disciplic succession stands as a serious stumbling block, because it seems to give the opportunity for personally unqualified people to teach and enforce defective conclusions and occupy positions from which they create a lot of damage to society. They claim that they are "official disciples, representatives and successors" of the actually qualified *acharya* and this automatically makes them genuine authorities - something that in their eyes includes the power to modify the teachings of the *acharya* himself.

In this verse we see that Krishna instructed Arjuna because according to him at that time the transmission of this knowledge had been lost and the purpose of the lineage had been defeated. The proof is given by the observation of how society has become degraded.

However, the solution is simple. The Vedic tradition stands for the greatest freedom of thought and expression: at any time a new disciplic lineage can be started, and the value of such lineage depends on the value of the teachings that are transmitted.

The definition of Raja Rishi offered by this verse shows that not only *brahmanas*, but *kshatriyas* and any other member of society (9.32-33) can attain the perfection of Self realization and therefore become qualified to start a spiritual lineage.

VERSE 3

स एवायं मया तेऽद्य योगः प्रोक्तः पुरातनः ।

sa evāyaṁ mayā te'dya yogaḥ proktaḥ purātanah ।

भक्तोऽसि मे सखा चेति रहस्यं ह्येतदुत्तमम् ॥ ४-३ ॥

bhakto'si me sakhā ceti rahasyaṁ hyetaduttamam ॥ 4-3 ॥

sah: that (same); *eva*: certainly; *ayam*: this; *maya*: by me; *te*: to you; *adya*: today; *yogaḥ*: yoga; *proktaḥ*: explained; *puratanah*: very ancient; *bhaktah*: devotee; *asi*: you are; *me*: to me; *sakha*: friend; *ca*: and; *iti*: thus; *rahasyam*: secret; *hi*: certainly; *etat*: this; *uttamam*: supreme/ transcendental.

"Today I am (explaining) to you the same (knowledge of) Yoga that was discussed in the ancient times; (because) you are my devotee and friend (I give you) this supreme secret."

The expression *bhakto 'si me sakha ceti* highlights the fact that Arjuna has a personal relationship with Krishna in a sentiment of friendship (*sakhya rasa*), one of the various sentiments that a devotee (*bhakta*) can have towards God.

Already in 3.31-32 Krishna clearly said that an envious person will not be able to accept the teachings of *Gita*. This is due to the fact that envy will make one blind to the actual value of the teaching, and therefore an envious person will not accept Krishna as an authority.

Bhakti is exactly the opposite: when love and devotion are present, each and every small word is valued like a wonderful treasure, with the eager attention that enables us to see its deepest or "secret" meanings.

Bhakti, loving devotion, is a major requirement in the process of attaining self-realization and the divine platform – in fact, as Krishna repeats again and again in *Gita*, it is the crucial requirement.

However, we need to make a distinction between genuine *bhakti* and the cheap superficial sentimental attraction of *prakrita sahayas* that is usually also called “devotion”. Genuine *bhakti* is supported by deep and solid knowledge and renunciation – *jnana* and *vairagya*.

Materialistic and superficial persons have a simplistic vision of the different *rasas* and personal relationships with God, so to please their material ego and pride they may artificially present themselves as devotees in the “highest *rasa*” – the *parakiya madhurya rasa* of the *gopis* of Vrindavana, who were the secret lovers of Krishna in Vrindavana and neglected their wedded husbands to join Krishna in the *rasa lila*.

In spite of their strong identification with the material body and their numerous *anarthas*, gross behavioral problems and heavy attachments to material position, fame, name, profit and sense gratification, these deluded persons often project imaginative fantasies about their supposed ecstatic intimate service in “Goloka

Vrindavana”, in the illusion that such dreaming is sufficient to qualify them as the highest devotees and authorities in the field of devotion.

Sometimes this delusional mentality can even confuse the minds of people to the point they believe that they are entitled to commit offenses towards great devotees “in lower *rasas*” (such as *svakiya* or legitimate conjugal sentiment, *vatsalya* or parental sentiment, *sakhya* or friendship, and *dasya* or service in respect and admiration) or even to the direct forms of the Lord who characteristically interact with devotees in such relationships.

VERSE 4

अर्जुन उवाच ।

arjuna uvāca ।

अपरं भवतो जन्म परं जन्म विवस्वतः ।

aparaṁ bhavato janma paraṁ janma vivasvataḥ ।

कथमेतद्विजानीयां त्वमादौ प्रोक्तवानिति ॥ ४-४ ॥

kathametadvijānīyāṁ tvamādaḥ proktavāniti ॥ 4-4 ॥

arjuna: Arjuna; *uvaca:* said; *aparam:* inferior/ junior; *bhavatah:* your; *janma:* birth; *param:* superior/ senior; *janma:* birth; *vivasvatah:* of Vivasvan; *katham:* how; *etat:* this; *vijaniyam:* I am to understand; *tvam:* you; *adau:* in the beginning; *proktavan:* instructor; *iti:* thus.

Arjuna said:

"Vivasvan appeared long before you (appeared), (so) he is much older than you. How am I to understand that in the beginning (of creation) you instructed him?"

In this verse we see that although he is a devotee and a friend, and free from envy, Arjuna does not hesitate to question what Krishna is saying.

As we have already mentioned a few times, questioning the authority cannot be considered an offensive behavior; rather, it is a basic and crucial part of the process of acquiring the proper knowledge, because it helps making sure that we have actually understood the teachings, both in theory and practice.

This is why questions can and should cover both the teachings and the personal behavior of the teachers.

Whenever a teacher constantly refuses to answer questions, or even worse, becomes incensed at questions and considers them offensive, we should understand that he is not a qualified teacher and should be immediately abandoned.

Of course sometimes the student may not be able to understand answers that are above his level of knowledge, but a good teacher has the duty to find the best way to present the concepts - usually with examples, as we can see from all the scriptures and the recordings of the teachings of the *acharyas*.

Krishna is speaking to Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, about 5000 years ago, and he had taken birth as the son of Vasudeva and Devaki only a relatively short time before that, while Vivasvan (Surya) had received this same Knowledge of Yoga at least several thousands of years earlier, in Treta Yuga, and was born from Kashyapa, son of Marici, son of Brahma at the beginning of creation.

So from the historical point of view, Arjuna's question makes sense. Only, it is relative sense, because the historical perspective does not consider that the individual continues to exist lifetime after lifetime.

At the beginning of his instructions (*Gita* 2.12) Krishna had already explained to Arjuna that everyone continues to exist even after death because of the process of reincarnation, although in different bodies the conditioned soul has difficulties in recovering the memories of his previous lifetimes.

Individuals who are excessively identified with the present body – as man or woman, tall or short, white or black, young or old – and the social position – nationality, family of birth, caste, financial position, occupation etc. - cannot possibly recall memories of bodies that were quite different and/or occupied a very different social position.

All the ancient civilizations normally accepted the concept of reincarnation, although during the last 1500 years such concept was banned and persecuted in western culture. Now it has come out again with renovated energy and relevance to people's individual and collective life, inspired by the growing influence and diffusion of the teachings of *yoga* in western countries.

Paradoxically, such knowledge of reincarnation and *yoga* has become much more influential in western countries, where it had been absent for a long time, than in India where it was preserved in an uninterrupted way for thousands of years.

The knowledge of reincarnation is based on the fundamental point that we are not the material body we are presently having.

Giving up the identification with the present temporary body and its characteristics, and being able to see oneself as the soul, not tied to any specific historical designation, is the necessary pre-requisite for anyone to be able to remember and integrate past lifetimes, because this requires to be able to see oneself in a different historical designation, and a different body, with sufficient openness of mind.

The best philosophical and psychological environment that favors the useful and harmonic integration of the memories of previous lifetimes is Vedic knowledge, especially the science of *yoga*, that gives the most complete, detailed and precise knowledge of reincarnation.

Some people state that it is not a good thing to try and remember one's previous lifetimes, and that we should concentrate on solving the problems of this life, but they do not understand that the lessons we failed to learn properly in our previous lifetimes, or we learned and forgot, are precisely the reason why we find it difficult to solve our problems in this lifetime.

When our calculations prove wrong, and don't add up as we had expected, we may want to get our old books out and verify if we actually remember the multiplication table correctly, even if that was part of the school curriculum of a previous year.

VERSE 5

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

śrībhagavānuvāca ।

बहूनि मे व्यतीतानि जन्मानि तव चार्जुन ।

bahūni me vyatītāni janmāni tava cārjuna ।

तान्यहं वेद सर्वाणि न त्वं वेत्थ परन्तप ॥ ४-५ ॥

tānyaham veda sarvāṇi na tvam vettha parantapa ॥ 4-5 ॥

sri: the wonderful; *bhagavan:* Lord; *uvaca:* said; *bahuni:* many; *me:* my; *vyatitani:* have passed; *janmani:* births; *tava:* your; *ca:* and; *arjuna:* Arjuna; *tani:* those; *aham:* I; *veda:* I know; *sarvani:*

all; *na*: not; *tvam*: you; *vettha*: you know; *parantapa*: o scorcher of the enemy.

The Lord said:

"O Arjuna, both you and I have known many lifetimes. I remember them all, while you do not, o Parantapa."

The name Sri Bhagavan is regularly used to refer to Krishna in *Gita*. We have already elaborated on its meaning in the commentary to verse 2.11, so we will not repeat the explanation here. Another interesting name that we find now and then in *Gita* refers to Arjuna: Parantapa is composed by *param* ("other") *tapa* ("scorching"), and indicates that Arjuna's enemies are scorched by the sun of his prowess.

By addressing Arjuna with this name, Krishna is hinting that he is not an ordinary man and therefore he must already know the answer to the question.

It is perfectly possible to remember one's previous lifetimes, although certainly our limited material mind can contain only a limited amount of memories and thoughts at the conscious level. The subconscious level is much larger (although still limited) and it is used to store all the useful memories of all our past lifetimes, but it is not easily accessible by the conscious mind.

Apart from the *avatars* that are direct manifestations of Vishnu or Shiva or Shakti, who have unlimited divine powers and perfect omniscience, even the individual *jivatmas* can remember their previous lifetimes. Spontaneously remembering at the conscious level usually does not happen because most of such memories would be overwhelming and traumatic; the same thing happens with difficult memories of this life itself, that refer to denied values or needs, feelings or thoughts that our subconscious has come to consider improper or negative.

However, the memories remain buried somewhere in the subterranean cells of the subconscious and can come out from time to time in the form of vague and distant impressions, dreams, feelings and emotions. Their presence is constantly manifested in the form of innate inclinations, qualities, fears, talents, ability to understand and learn a subject rather than another, attraction and repulsion, unexplained certainties etc.

The subconscious is the guardian of all these memories and only lets them surface at the conscious level when it sincerely believes that such memories will be useful. Since the subconscious is generally programmed by habits, impressions, decisions made at conscious level or accepted from a figure of authority, our subconscious will not approve memories of previous lifetimes if it has been conditioned to think that we do not have previous lifetimes, or that remembering them is improper. The same thing happens with traumatic or difficult memories even of this life itself.

Memories of previous lifetimes are more difficult to remember than the memories of this lifetime because the conscious mind has more difficulties in identifying with them, due to strong bodily identification (with a particular form, relationships, role, etc). The more one identifies with the present body (gender, race, nationality, age), the more difficult it is to remember things that are connected to a different body.

It is not possible to remember everything about our previous lifetimes anyway, because our mind is limited. This is the difference between the supreme Consciousness and the individual consciousness of which Krishna is speaking in this verse. However, the fact that we cannot possibly know everything should not stop us from making an effort to gain a reasonable amount of important and relevant knowledge that will help us solve the problems we face every day.

VERSE 6

अजोऽपि सन्नव्ययात्मा भूतानामीश्वरोऽपि सन् ।

ajo'pi sannavyayātmā bhūtānāmīśvaro'pi san ।

प्रकृतिं स्वामधिष्ठाय सम्भवाम्यात्ममायया ॥ ४-६ ॥

prakṛtiṁ svāmadhiṣṭhāya sambhavāmyātmamāyayā ॥ 4-6 ॥

ajah: unborn; *api:* although; *san:* being; *avyaya-atma:* imperishable Self; *bhutanam:* of the living entities/ conditions of life; *isvarah:* the Supreme Lord; *api:* although; *san:* being; *prakritim:* nature; *svam:* (my) own; *adhisthaya:* controlling/ situated; *sambhavami:* I take birth; *atma-mayaya:* through (my) own power.

"Although I am unborn and imperishable, and although I am the Supreme Lord of the creatures/ states of being, I am present in/ I control this *prakriti* that belongs to me, and I manifest myself out of my own power."

As we will also see later in *Gita*, Krishna is not an ordinary man, not even an ordinary liberated soul. The word *Isvara* makes this point very clear. There is only one *Isvara*: there cannot be two or more, as *Isvara* is the Supreme Lord by definition.

The nature (*prakriti*) of the Supreme Lord is characterized by the power of control (*aisvarya*) that includes omniscience and omnipotence. Therefore even when he takes birth, the Lord continues to maintain the perfect awareness - knowledge and memory - of his own nature and the events of his previous appearances, as well as the awareness of the nature and events regarding all other living entities and the universe itself. This is why he is the Lord of all living beings and all states of being.

The definition of *avyaya* is "imperishable", and in this case it applies not only to the eternal nature of spirit, but also to the awareness of Isvara. His power of knowledge and awareness is never diminished by the limitations of material nature or by circumstances, even when taking birth in this world. The ordinary living entities, on the other hand, are forced to die and take birth by the laws of material nature to which they are subject. The shock of birth knocks out all the memory and knowledge from them, so that they gradually need to learn everything again, including walking and talking.

The *jivatma* can become liberated and progress to expand his individual consciousness by eliminating the limitations and barriers of material bodily identifications, but such progress is limited by the atomic size of the *jiva* that is called *anu-atma* ("atomic soul").

All *jivatmas* are simply cells in the body of the Supreme: it is impossible for one single cell to attain the expanse of consciousness of an entire body.

In these verses Krishna begins to reveal his true divine nature in response to Arjuna's doubts. It appears that previously the relationship between Krishna and Arjuna had been very familiar and affectionate, but based on the sentiments of friendship between equals (*sakhya rasa*), as it will be confirmed later in the text (11.41-42). The crisis of Arjuna's sadness at the onset of the battle has opened new doors to his perception, and he has already moved from the mood of friendship to the position of student and disciple accepting Krishna as his teacher or *guru*.

But Krishna is not just any teacher. His authority comes from a depth of consciousness and knowledge that is not as limited as the human beings', and his awareness is never clouded or interrupted by the changes of the material mind and body.

Rather than being the product of the circumstances offered by the level of evolution of the material body, the consciousness of Krishna is independent from all material conditions and actually produces the circumstances and the body or form he uses to perform his activities. It is the complete control of consciousness over the universal manifestation, the Yoga Maya: the highest and supreme power of Yoga, that is expressed in the relationship between Purusha and Prakriti, between Isvara and Shakti.

The individual living entities, being parts and parcels of Isvara (God), also carry a reflection of this *purushatva*, this power to control nature and matter and enjoy it, but because they are limited they become controlled by the Shakti instead of controlling her: therefore they experience her as Maha Maya, the great power of illusion, the manifestation of material nature. However, it is sufficient for them to overcome their material delusion (*ahankara* and *mamatva*) to move to a different level of perspective, and become happily situated in the divine consciousness.

This paradigm shift is like realizing that we have been swimming against the strong current of the river, and making the conscious and deliberate choice of swimming in the natural direction of the flow of things instead of struggling to impose our own will power. Instantly, as we surrender to the flow of reality, we become relieved of our fatigue and anxiety, and we find that we are traveling much faster towards our actual destination. We stop being hostile to the river and we become a part of the river itself, as our attention is directed towards the purpose and goal of the river: attaining the ocean.

This supreme consciousness that we call Krishna Consciousness is the ocean of happiness, knowledge and eternity: the very purpose and goal that we have sought lifetime after lifetime in our pursuit of real happiness.

VERSE 7

यदा यदा हि धर्मस्य ग्लानिर्भवति भारत ।

yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānirbhavati bhārata ।

अभ्युत्थानमधर्मस्य तदात्मानं सृजाम्यहम् ॥ ४-७ ॥

abhyutthānamadharmasya tadātmānaṁ sṛjāmyaham ॥ 4-7 ॥

yada yada: whenever/ every time; *hi*: certainly; *dharmasya*: of the *dharma*; *glanih*: decline; *bhavati*: becomes; *bharata*: o descendant of Bharata (Arjuna); *abhyutthanam*: rise; *adharmasya*: of the *adharma*; *tada*: at that time; *atmanam*: my self; *srijami*: I create/ manifest; *aham*: I.

"O descendant of Bharata (Arjuna), whenever *dharma* declines and *adharma* rises, at that time I manifest myself."

This is one of the most famous verses of *Gita*. Unfortunately, at present it is also one of the least understood, mostly because the influence of *tamas* has caused people to lose the knowledge and awareness of what is exactly *dharma* versus *adharma*.

The same tendency to ignorance has always prevented ordinary people from actually recognizing a divine manifestation or a divine mission; usually the *avatars* and *acharyas* become universally acknowledged rather later in the course of their lives, or even after they have disappeared. So much that usually the *avatars* and *acharyas* are faced with opposition especially from those who consider themselves the guardians of the religious or social traditions among their contemporaries.

At present we can see the conditions for the appearance of the Divine Principle, and in fact such appearance might already have happened. When the society becomes degraded, and the good

people who have knowledge become too attached to *sattva* and they "do not want troubles" so they do not speak up, the need for divine intervention is most urgent.

In Kali yuga it is not easy to recognize an *avatara*, because there are lots of people who try to make a career for themselves by claiming to be an incarnation of God, sometimes even trying to get recognized legally by courts. In fact, this should be considered a disqualification rather than a qualification, because in Kali yuga a real incarnation of God will present himself merely as a devotee of God, not as God himself.

This means that God does not descend in this world with the purpose of being worshiped and recognized as God, but to work tirelessly to encourage people to become situated in genuine *dharma* and to progress in transcendental Knowledge. Unfortunately, it is much easier to follow a personality cult, as we can see from the innumerable fan and groupie clubs that grow around movie actors, pop singers or musicians, or sports personalities. The behavior of such fans and groupies can easily be described as deep devotion, as they undoubtedly manifest extremely strong emotions of love and dedication, to the point of ecstasy - fainting, crying, raising of hairs, stuttering, etc. They also go through unbelievable hardships, sacrificing their own bodies and minds, as well as considerable amounts of money and time, just to literally worship their idols. They wear T-shirts and badges with the faces or names of their idols, constantly think about them and speak about them to anyone who will listen and preferably with other fellow fans - creating websites, magazines, and clubs specifically for this purpose.

However, the divine mission is not aimed at channeling energies towards a mere personality cult, but at establishing the actual ethical principles of *dharma*, protecting the good people and destroying the evil doers - as it is clearly stated in the next verse.

The Divine Principle manifests itself as the circumstances require. It can be carried by a simple devotee who preaches it, or may do so directly or indirectly as an *avatara*. The meaning of *avatara* is not very easy to understand, because it goes beyond the material body and elements and has no limitations of space, time or even individuality. Direct manifestations are called *svamsa* ("own parts") *avataras* while indirect manifestations are called *vibhinnamsa* ("separated parts") or *shaktyavesa* ("invested with power") *avataras*. The direct manifestations are God, while the indirect manifestations are liberated individual souls, that may have been liberated before descending in this world for their particular mission, or became liberated while in the material world and received the power for the spiritual mission.

Some ignorant people believe that God/ Krishna can only appear in India (*bharate*) and their low proficiency in grammar and spelling makes them conclude that *bharata* in this verse means "in India". This is ridiculous. Krishna is addressing Arjuna as "descendant of Bharata", just like he is doing in so many other verses in *Gita*, without any connection to geographical locations. God can appear wherever he likes, not only in any place on this planet and from any human community, but even on other planets or among other species of life.

VERSE 8

परित्राणाय साधूनां विनाशाय च दुष्कृताम् ।

paritrāṇāya sādḥūnām vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām ।

धर्मसंस्थापनार्थाय सम्भवामि युगे युगे ॥ ४-८ ॥

dharmasamsthāpanārthāya sambhavāmi yuge yuge ॥ 4-8 ॥

paritranaya: for the protection/ deliverance; *sadhunam*: of the good people; *vinasaya*: for the destruction; *ca*: and; *duskritam*: of the evil doers; *dharma*: of *dharma*; *samsthapana*: the full establishment; *arthaya*: for the purpose of; *sambhavami*: I manifest; *yuge yuge*: from age to age.

"I manifest myself *yuga* after *yuga*, to protect the good people, destroy the evil doers and to establish *dharma*."

This verse is also very famous and very often quoted, and misinterpreted according to the particular identifications and attachments of those who read it. The three key words are *sadhu*, *duskrita*, and *dharma*.

Sadhu literally means "good" or "saintly", and for those who understand and practice the genuine ethics of the Vedic tradition it refers to the people who are dedicated to sincerely pursue the path of knowledge, truthfulness, compassion, cleanliness and self control, free from material identifications and attachments and ready to sacrifice themselves for the greater good. Such people always behave in accordance to the universal principles of ethical action, and they never commit any crime or selfish action.

Duskrita literally means "evil doers", and obviously refers to the people who commit evil deeds. The word *krita* comes from the same root of *karma*, and clearly indicates action or activity. The persons that are destroyed by the *avatars* of God are not simply ignorant or foolish people deluded by false knowledge or beliefs, because the progressive system of life in this world will automatically and naturally take care of their individual evolution.

Rather, these *duskrita* are those who objectively constitute a major problem to the progress of others, because they behave aggressively against the progress of individuals and society. They are hostile to knowledge and worship ignorance, fight against

truthfulness and compassion, and always try to control others to subdue them to their own domination. These people will be described later in chapter 16, entitled the *daivasura sampad vibhaga yoga*: the *yoga* of differentiating between the characteristics of the divine and the demoniac personalities.

Unfortunately, due to ignorance some people misinterpret the meaning of *dharma* as a particular established/ institutionalized religion, self-righteous conventional moralism, ideological dogma, or even birth prejudice as "caste", and therefore the words *sadhu* and *duskṛta* become accordingly distorted. So *sadhu* is translated as a "pious man" or a "devotee" (in a very bigoted sense), and *duskṛta* is translated as "miscreant": a person who is automatically considered depraved and villainous simply because he is a "non-believer" or a "heretic" in the eyes of the politicized religious institutions. After pinning such distorted meanings to the definitions, it is easy to justify the "complete protection" of those who pledge allegiance to the political power disguised as religion, up to the point of covering up for their demoniac crimes, as well as the relentless persecution and "destruction" (by all means) of those cannot be subdued to the deviant policies or silenced.

The expressions *paritranaya* and *vinasaya* are very interesting, too.

Paritra means "complete deliverance" and referred to the problems faced by the good and innocent people, it indicates protection. However, we need to understand what "protection" means. The good people are protected, but not because they never face problems or die.

Of course anyone who has a material body will inevitably have to die, and any material possession will inevitably be lost. This material world is by nature fraught with three kinds of sufferings - those coming from one's own body and mind, those coming from other living entities, and those coming from the natural elements -

so we cannot think that good people will always be free from all sufferings while living in this world.

The protection Krishna is talking about consists in the personal attention and guidance that a good person receives so that s/he can progress in life materially and spiritually; a progressive person performs good actions for the benefit of all, and receives the good results of such actions which support his/ her life for the greater good.

Good people, too, will have to face problems and difficulties - as exemplified by the story of the Pandavas - but they will be able to use every circumstance to further their service to the Divine plan and to raise the level of their consciousness. A good person, especially one who is on a higher level of consciousness, bravely faces all difficulties considering them as a test for their progress and a payment they need to make to set the balance straight for their own bad choices in the past.

However, this does not mean that they remain passively inert in the process: they certainly work hard and do their best to improve the situation, but always by performing dharmic actions.

Vinasaya means "for the destruction". Some people may feel that "destruction" is too strong a word, but that is generally because they project their personal split personality over the Personality of Godhead. They think that "good people" are never forceful, so they should never fight and never destroy. This truly applies in the sense they never hurt or attack innocent and good living entities and they do not rampage in blind destruction of resources. But the Personality of Godhead not only has a "sweet" and "benevolent" aspect (called *saumya* in Sanskrit), but also a "fierce" and "destructive" aspect (called *ugra* or *asaumya*) that is directed against the bad things that create obstacles and sufferings in the material world.

A genuine devotee loves both, while sentimentalist bigots tend to prefer those forms of God that appear weaker and easier to handle - such as infancy and very early childhood - even when their depictions are inappropriate and misleading in regard to the actual qualities and mission manifested by that particular Personality of Godhead.

For example, Ganesha was never a newborn in diapers: he was created by Parvati from the sandalwood paste covering her body, so that he would stand to guard her door while she was taking bath.

Similarly, we should be wary of those who prefer images of Personalities of Godhead that show some defects or negative condition - such as Ganesha sporting reading glasses, or little Krishna crying, or Radha behaving foolishly, and so on.

Another important consideration is that already the laws of the universe, starting from the law of Karma, take care of the task of protecting and supporting the good people and destroying the evil doers.

So why should God appear personally in this world? God descends to establish a new aspect of the eternal and universal *dharma* (*dharmam tu saksad bhagavat pranitam, Bhagavata Purana* 6.3.19) that is most suitable for the particular time, place and circumstances, and the highest principle of religion consists in becoming attracted to Godhead.

This is the reason why each divine *avatara* displays so many extraordinary and endearing adventures or *lilas*: by hearing, narrating and remembering these adventures, any human being can progress in the divine consciousness and ultimately attain spiritual liberation and pure love for God, as we will see in the next verse.

VERSE 9

जन्म कर्म च मे दिव्यमेवं यो वेत्ति तत्त्वतः ।

janma karma ca me divyamevaṁ yo veti tattvataḥ ।

त्यक्त्वा देहं पुनर्जन्म नैति मामेति सोऽर्जुन ॥ ४-९ ॥

tyaktvā dehaṁ punarjanma naiti māmeti so'arjuna ।। 4-9 ।।

janma: birth; *karma*: activities; *ca*: and; *me*: my; *divyam*: divine; *evam*: thus; *yah*: s/he; *vetti*: knows; *tattvataḥ*: in reality; *tyaktva*: by/ after leaving; *deham*: the body; *punah*: again; *janma*: birth; *na*: not; *eti*: attains; *mam*: me; *eti*: attains; *sah*: s/he; *arjuna*: o Arjuna.

"O Arjuna, one who truly knows the divine nature of my births and activities does not have to take another birth after leaving this body, but comes to me."

Continuing the logical thread from the previous verse, Krishna is saying that the highest principle of *dharma* consists in the evolution of consciousness that culminates in *moksha*, liberation, and *prema*, love and union with God.

The births and activities of the Personality of Godhead are always perfectly engineered to set an example, deliver important teachings, attract the attention of people, and demonstrate the superiority of the Divine existence. The realization of a greater and higher purpose and consciousness is essential to direct the individual progress into the proper direction, that rises above the animal needs and propensities that human beings cannot find fully satisfying: this message was introduced in the first chapter of *Gita*

with Arjuna's sadness and dissatisfaction, and is developed gradually through the text.

One of the most popular translations and commentaries of *Bhagavad gita*, written by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami, is entirely focused on the concept of Krishna Consciousness as the core message of this all-important text.

But what is the meaning of "Krishna Consciousness" (*krishna chaitanya*)? Without a deep understanding of both words, of both concepts, one remains on the superficial level of political allegiance that has been hammered into the minds of the people at global level as the only possible meaning of "religion".

It is very true that the mere academic study of *Gita* is not sufficient, but simply accepting on faith that Krishna is God and pledging sectarian allegiance to him is not sufficient either. This is not the message of *Gita*. In this verse Krishna clearly says that in order to attain him, one needs to truly know the *tattva* of the divine mission. One needs to fully overcome the identification with the material body, and understand that the real person is spiritual: this is called Brahman realization.

The first chapter clarifies that it is necessary to see things with a wider perspective than the daily selfish consciousness of materialistic people, and the second chapter makes a very clear distinction between the material body and the real identity of the Atman. The third chapter explains that the purpose of action and duty is to serve the Supreme and participate in supporting the universe, and the fourth chapter further explores the knowledge of the purpose of the action and duty.

In the subsequent chapters, Krishna will supply all the knowledge required to actually understand what "Krishna Consciousness" means, and attain a level of devotion that is genuine and

progressive (18.54) and based on *dharma* and knowledge, and not simply superficial and sentimental bigotry.

In fact it is very dangerous to believe that by a simple act of faith and submission one will instantly attain liberation or salvation. According to such logic, one does not need to reform his own bad behavior or correct his ignorant and delusional misconceptions, abandon material identification and attachments, properly study the scriptures, apply Krishna's teachings in practice, or attain Self-realization on the spiritual level. Just because one confesses of "accepting Krishna as his savior and God", at the time of death he will automatically be flown to paradise by some angels called Vishnudutas.

This is a typical abrahamic concept and extremely dangerous because it gives the opportunity to ruthless and cynical individuals to hijack the divine mission and, falsely claiming to be the only authorized representatives of Krishna/ God, bring about the politicization of religion.

Such politicians are particularly interested in presenting just "the stories" of Krishna, projecting their own personal fantasies for the purpose of entertainment of the "devotees", to keep them deeply engrossed into some golden dreams.

Actually we need to sincerely practice Krishna's teachings, including the instruction to worship and serve the Personality of Godhead and his true mission; we must understand them in their reality, in their deep significance in the context of the genuine Vedic knowledge and tradition - not in a superficial way, like people become fond of the adventures of some cartoon character or adventure movie hero.

Already commercial cartoons have been created, showing Krishna and Balarama, Hanuman, and other divine Personalities, engaged

in totally invented bogus stories and distorting the meaning of the divine mission - for example, presenting Arjuna as a coward, totally terrorized by the Kurus and blaming himself for having foolishly caused the battle, or Krishna in his childhood adventures in Vrindavana killing innocent ordinary animals or destroying robots, and so on. Another cartoon series shows Krishna and Kamsa reborn in our days and attending the same primary school together, where they keep bickering because they are "eternal enemies".

Unfortunately the mass of people in Kali yuga are foolish and superficial, and especially misled by unqualified and often demonic leaders that enforce the cult of ignorance.

We should not think that demonic people can oppose the Personality of Godhead only in a direct way: very often, we find that they pretend to be his worshipers and even his representatives, because from that position they can easily hijack the divine mission and cause its failure.

There is a famous saying, "if you can't defeat them, join them", meaning that it is much easier to destroy a genuine spiritual movement from the inside, leading the followers astray, commercializing and trivializing the teachings, causing people to waste a lot of time and other resources on irrelevant issues, introducing poisonous misconceptions and playing to the material identifications and attachments of the weakest members.

These people are sometimes called *kali-chelas*, "disciples of the age of Kali", the age of quarrel and hypocrisy, because their specialty is to make a big show of great devotion and sainthood, while behind the scenes they keep scheming and trafficking to fight against truthfulness and the other genuine principles of *dharma*.

VERSE 10

वीतरागभयक्रोधा मन्मया मामुपाश्रिताः ।

vītarāgabhayakrodhā manmayā māmupāśritāḥ ।

बहवो ज्ञानतपसा पूता मद्भावमागताः ॥ ४-१० ॥

bahavo jñānatapasā pūtā madbhāvamāgatāḥ ।। 4-10।।

vīta: free from; *raga*: attachment; *bhaya*: fear; *krodha*: anger; *man-maya*: absorbed in me; *mam*: in me; *upasritah*: taking shelter; *bahavah*: many; *jNana tapasa*: by knowledge and austerity/ by the austerity of knowledge; *puta*: purified; *mad-bhavam*: my state; *agatah*: have come.

"Many who were free from attachment, fear and anger, fully taking shelter in me, have been purified by austerity and knowledge, and attained my realization."

Krishna clearly expresses here that Krishna Consciousness (*mad-bhavam agatah*) must be built on strong foundations: freedom from all attachments and material identifications in the Brahman realization, equanimity towards all living entities and perception of the Antaryami Paramatman, the Supreme Soul in all living beings, selflessness (either concentrated or expanded to "one's party"), the strict morality that comes from honestly following the rules called *yama* and *niyama* and the actual knowledge of the *Vedas*, both on the material and the spiritual fields.

It is said, *sruti smriti puranadi pancharatra-vidhim vina, aikaintiki harer bhaktir utpatayaiva kalpate*, "So-called exclusive *bhakti* to Lord Hari (Vishnu) that is not in accordance to the *sruti*, the *smriti*, the *Puranas* and the other Vedic scriptures, as well as with the science of the *Pancharatra*, is simply a fantasy that will create a

lot of trouble in society." (*Bhakti rasamrita sindhu* 1.2.101, quoting from *Brahma yamala Purana*). The realization mentioned by Krishna in this verse with the expression *mad-bhavam agatah* can be applied at various levels.

The most fundamental level of the meaning of *bhava* is "existence" or "nature": in this verse, this indicates a person who attains self-realization as the realization of the spiritual transcendental nature or identity that is Brahman.

Another meaning is "feeling", implying that the individual soul develops a level of consciousness that is of the same nature of God, or in other words he overcomes the sense of duality and separation, and his mind and body become mere instruments to perform direct service to God.

Another particular meaning of *bhava* is "ecstasy of love" and is found in very elevated devotees who taste a deep loving personal relationship with God; there are specific symptoms characterizing this experience that must be accompanied by a consistent lifestyle, realizations and attitude.

We must draw a clear line between genuine transcendental *bhakti* and materialistic sentimentalism, sometimes called *prakrita sahajism* ("spontaneous simplism").

This verse summarizes all the crucial factors in genuine *bhakti*: first of all, a real devotee should have no attachment, especially to adharmic activities or ignorance. He should have no attachment for honors and social position, name, image, control over other people, control over money and resources, and similar forms of egotism and selfish sense gratification.

A real devotee should also be free from fear. This is possible only when one has truly realized that we are not this body, and that death is just a normal stage of life, an inevitable passage for all.

Another reason why the genuine devotee is not afraid is that he has a real direct relationship with the Paramatma, the Lord in the heart of all living entities. Whether he is going to be attacked by other beings or not, he knows that the Lord is aware of whatever is happening, and therefore every event is part of the plan of the Lord.

It is important to understand that the protection granted to the devotee by the Lord does not imply immortality or absolute freedom from all losses and problems and sufferings, because these are inevitable for all those who have a material body. The real protection consists in being guided through those experiences that are useful for our work. This realization automatically removes the cause for fear and anger. Fear and anger will only be used as an instrument for our work when it is really required, as we have already mentioned. The specific characteristics of devotion are the constant meditation and surrender of the devotee, who takes shelter in God, but they must be purified by knowledge and austerity, otherwise they remain on the material sentimentalistic level.

VERSE 11

ये यथा मां प्रपद्यन्ते तांस्तथैव भजाम्यहम् ।

ye yathā māṁ prapadyante tāṁstathaiva bhajāmyaham ।

मम वर्तमानुवर्तन्ते मनुष्याः पार्थ सर्वशः ॥ ४-११ ॥

mama vartmānuvartante manuṣyāḥ pārtha sarvaśaḥ ।। 4-11 ।।

ye: those; *yatha:* like; *mam:* me; *prapadyante:* surrender/ approach; *tan:* they; *tatha:* like; *eva:* certainly; *bhajami:* I reciprocate; *aham:* I; *mama:* my; *vartma:* path; *anuvartante:*

follow; *manusyah*: human beings; *partha*: o son of Pritha (Arjuna); *sarvasah*: all.

"O Partha, as much as they surrender to me, in the same way I reciprocate with them. All human beings follow my path."

All human beings are on a progressive path that ultimately leads to the realization of the Divine. They may be searching consciously or unconsciously, but everybody is instinctively seeking the Supreme, just like all rivers naturally flow towards the ocean, although their course is rarely straight.

The idea of God is inherent in all human beings, including the atheists and agnostics, and it surfaces especially in the emotionally difficult moments, when one is faced with great tribulations or dangers. The concept itself may vary greatly from one individual to the other - some are more attracted to the patriarchal figure of a Father who is in heaven, some are more attracted to the figure of the Mother. Some do not believe in a personal form of God, but they still have a strong concept of a Higher Good and identify it with *dharma*, or the ethical principles that are instinctively perceived as legitimately ruling the lives of all, and to which one should sacrifice the lower tendencies of selfishness. Some see God in human society or in family values, in community, land or country.

People who are even less evolved perceive God as Power - from the power of the natural phenomena such as earthquakes, tsunamis, waterfalls, ocean storms, cyclones, lightning, fire etc - to the power that some individual beings appear to have on others and on their environment, to the power that manifests through life itself.

However, each individual proceeds at different speed, creating negative reactions, positive reactions or no reactions to their activities, and obtaining different results – all depending on how

much each individual surrenders to God, follows the divine instructions and works in the world.

We have already said that the Vedic system is progressive and can accommodate all levels of development and needs, whether one is free from desires (*akama*), full of all kinds of desires (*sarva kama*) or desiring liberation (*moksha kama*), as clearly stated in the *Bhagavata Purana* (2.3.10). God has a plan for each one of us, whether we are able to understand it or not: a path already traced that we are already treading, as we are all children of God (14.4), without restrictions based on birth (such as caste, race, nationality etc) or culture. Even those who do not pledge allegiance to God are God's children and are taken care of in God's plan: God has no "chosen people", as Krishna repeatedly states in *Gita*.

Some commentators, who have been educated in the nazi concept of the aryan race, state that the *manusya sarvasah*, "all the human beings", refers to the "qualified" or civilized human beings only, and that such qualification depends on birth. For such commentators, all other human beings are to be considered sub-humans, or *untermenschen*. These prejudiced people also fall in the category of the human beings of whom God takes care of, so for their benefit they will be awarded the blessing that will help them progress and become purified from their misconceptions: they will take birth in a similarly disadvantaged position, so that they will be able to experience it first-hand and understand the actual facts.

There are differences in the reciprocation that God gives to the devotee, but these are based on what the devotee wants from God. This is clearly stated in this verse by the word *yatha*: according to the purpose or the results they are seeking.

Often the Divine is compared to a *kalpa-vriksha*, a "wish-fulfilling tree" that can give us anything we wish for, either consciously or subconsciously. In fact, our subconscious normally directs us

towards the experiences that we need for our progress, even if such experiences appear to be unpleasant or even tragic.

When the devotee's consciousness has been purified by knowledge and austerity, and he has become free from attachment, fear and anger, and is fully taking shelter in God, he will naturally desire nothing less than a personal relationship with the Lord, and this is precisely what he is going to get.

VERSE 12

काङ्क्षन्तः कर्मणां सिद्धिं यजन्त इह देवताः ।

kāṅkṣantaḥ karmaṇām siddhiṁ yajanta iha devatāḥ ।

क्षिप्रं हि मानुषे लोके सिद्धिर्भवति कर्मजा ॥ ४-१२ ॥

kṣipraṁ hi mānuṣe loke siddhirbhavati karmajā ॥ 4-12 ॥

kankshantah: desiring/ praying for; *karmanam:* of the activities; *siddhim:* perfection/ success; *yajante:* they sacrifice/ worship; *iha:* here; *devatah:* to the Devas; *kshipram:* very quickly; *hi:* certainly; *manushe:* human; *loke:* world/ society; *siddhih:* perfection/ success; *bhavati:* becomes; *karma-ja:* from the action.

"Those human beings who desire to achieve perfection in their actions worship the Devas in this world, because (in this way) perfection can quickly be attained through one's efforts."

Understanding the concept of Devas is not easy, because in our ordinary experience we develop relationships with different individuals, each one of them having specific qualities and characteristics, abilities and tendencies. When we want our hair cut we go to the barber, when we want bread we go to the baker, and

when we want our vehicle repaired we go to the mechanic. So for a materialistically minded person there is not much difference between this ordinary experience and the Hindu tradition that says that one who wants good health should worship Surya (the Sun), one who wants to acquire knowledge should worship Sarasvati, one who wants to get wealth should worship Lakshmi, one who wants to progress without obstacles should worship Ganesha, and so on. But this is a mistaken conception.

Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad (1.4.10) states that one who worships the Devas by considering them different (from the Supreme, or from each other, or from Reality at large), does not have the (proper) knowledge and is like an animal to the Devas.

So what does "different" mean? There are two levels of meaning here; one applies to the non-difference between Devas, and between the Devas and the Supreme Personality of Godhead, and the other applies to the non-difference between the Devas and the worshiper.

Some people believe that Vishnu is God, while Shiva, Surya and Brahma are "demigods in *sattva guna*" and Bhairava, Chandi, Mahakali (and others) are "different demigods under *tamas guna*".

This is a dangerous mistake, due to a limited understanding and a separatist mentality. It's like saying that the high court judge is nothing more than a criminal because he deals with violations of the law, or that the manager of a dairy farm is nothing but a cow because he concerns himself with the production of milk.

The fact is that all the various Devas are simply different Personalities of the same Godhead, just like the various limbs of the body are non-different from the body itself. The perspective called *acintya-bheda-abheda tattva*, "inconceivably different and non-different" is the best explanation of this reality.

This also applies to the simultaneous difference and non-difference between the Godhead and the individual soul, where the individual souls are differentiated limbs of the same body of the Godhead.

Unity does not necessarily mean that there is no variety. In fact variety in the cells of the different organs and limbs of a body is a desirable feature, because it affords a greater range of activities and abilities.

Another very important point in this verse is that worshiping the Devas (which includes Vishnu himself), should always be accompanied by sincere practical work; one should not think that worship is a quick and easy substitute for sincere hard work (*karma ja*). The divine blessings are supporting and helping us, but we also need to do our part.

This verse does not condemn the worship of the Devas, as some people may think. It simply states that the divine blessings are essential in order to achieve success quickly.

And who does not want to be successful in this world? Is there anyone who wants to fail? That would be very stupid.

The type of success that we wish to attain may be different from one person to another, as we have seen in the previous verse.

A worshiper who has some material desires will ask for health, wealth, a good husband or wife, a son or a daughter etc, while a pure devotee will ask for the blessing of achieving an intimate personal relationship with God - like the *gopis* in Vrindavana did.

Someone who claims that he will not worship Mother Katyayani (Durga) because she is a "paltry demigod under the influence of *tamas* or *rajas*" is committing offenses on all levels - not least, he is trying to present himself as a greater devotee of Krishna than the *gopis* of Vrindavana themselves.

VERSE 13

चातुर्वर्ण्यं मया सृष्टं गुणकर्मविभागशः ।

cāturvarṇyaṁ mayā sṛṣṭaṁ guṇakarmavibhāgaśaḥ ।

तस्य कर्तारमपि मां विद्ध्यकर्तारमव्ययम् ॥ ४-१३ ॥

tasya kartāramapi māṁ viddhyakartāramavyayam ॥ 4-13 ॥

catuh: four; *varnyam:* *varnas*; *maya:* by me; *sristam:* created; *guna:* qualities; *karma:* activities/ duties; *vibhagasah:* divided (in categories); *tasya:* of that; *kartaram:* the doer; *api:* although; *mam:* me; *viddhi:* (you should) know; *akartaram:* not the doer; *avyayam:* imperishable.

"The four *varnas* have been created by me in accordance to the different qualities and activities, but although I am their maker, know that I am unchangeable and detached from action."

The perfect system of the *varnas* created by God is based on the individual's personal natural qualities/ tendencies and on the activities/ duties specified in many texts, starting from *Gita*. Later, because of the degradation of Kali yuga and the influence of racist cultures, the system of *varna* decayed and became the degraded hereditary caste system that is still causing so much suffering and so many problems to Hindu society. Without the degradation of the caste system, there would have been no mass conversions to Buddhism and Jainism, and later to Islam and Christianity, socialism and communism, naxalism, and cynical materialism. Indian society would have remained strong and united, each *varna* cooperating strictly with the others just like the limbs in a living body, and especially qualified *brahmanas* and *kshatriyas* would have been competent and cooperative to protect the land from invaders.

Still today, the absurdity of the degraded caste system, with its absolute birth prejudice, is alienating a large part of the Indian population and the almost totality of the global public opinion from Hinduism and Vedic culture.

To solve such problem it is sufficient to honestly return to the actual version of the genuine scriptures and to the prescriptions for the purification and progress of each member of society, both materially and spiritually, for the benefit of individuals, communities and society at large. The main concern of the Vedic system is indeed the benefit of the society as a whole, symbolized by the Virat purusha in the famous *Purusha sukta* (*Rig Veda* 10.90.12).

The commentators that are plagued by birth prejudices and confused by the racist idea of the hereditary caste system believe that the definition of *guna* in this verse means that *varnas* are different species of life with a different DNA - like one animal species is different from another. This was exactly the same ideology espoused and enforced by the Nazi German ideologues in the last century.

Apart from the obvious error on the scientific level - animals of different species cannot generate a fertile offspring from their union, while different races both among animals and human beings are perfectly able to do that - the "different DNA" theory based on racism in the fields of spirituality, religion, ethics and professional capabilities is easily disproved by everyday reality. These higher functions of the human mind and spirit have nothing to do with the color of the skin or hair - in fact we find great differences within the same family, what to speak of race. Of course, the atmosphere, mentality and life habits of the environment where one is born can greatly contribute to the individual's development, and it is also true that each soul is attracted to take birth in an environment that is suitable to his/her tendencies and level of evolution.

But there can also be other reasons for taking birth in a particular situation, and above all, if an individual is sufficiently determined, s/he can certainly change mentality and habits within one single lifetime and qualify for a different social position.

Vedic literature clearly teaches, *janmana jayate sudra*, "by birth everyone is born a *sudra*" and *brahma janati iti brahmanah*, "*brahmana* is one who knows Brahman (spirit)". There is not one single verse, in the entire body of Vedic literature, where birth is considered a decisive qualification to belong to a particular *varna* or even to the aryan community.

So where did this birth-based racist caste idea come from? It had started already with Kali yuga, but it became entrenched "scientifically" with the British colonial propagandists, who were aiming at gaining the support of the members of the "highest breeds" of India, by claiming a racial affinity with them.

The Aryan invasion theory, unfortunately still taught in Indian schools as if it was a proven historical fact, says that India had been civilized by hordes of nomadic warriors of "indoeuropean race" originating from the arid Caucasus region. These stronger, war-mongering and ruthless foreigners had white skin and auburn or blond hair, and, thanks to their superior iron weaponry, chariots and horses. They had massacred or enslaved the primitive and pacific native Dravidian populations (black of skin and hair), creating the four castes by diluting their "white DNA" through sexual unions with the slaves - the blacker the skin, the lower in the social ladder.

The British credited this "aryan race" with the introduction of Sanskrit, Vedic rituals, Vedic "gods" etc and claimed that a group of aryan had migrated to Europe to similarly become the dominant race and civilize the native tribal populations there.

This was a very convenient application of the pseudo-scientific ideas on racial anthropology that had been brewing in Europe from the times of Carl Linnaeus (1707–1778), the famous physician, botanist, and zoologist. In *Systema Naturae* (1767) he wrote of five human races: the white Europeanus of gentle character and inventive mind, the red Americanus of stubborn character and angered easily; the black Africanus relaxed and negligent; yellow Asiaticus avaricious and easily distracted; and the Monstrosus sub humans such as aborigines.

Thinkers such as Friedrich Hegel, Immanuel Kant, and Auguste Comte believed that western European culture was the acme of human socio-cultural evolution in a linear process, and approved slavery of "inferior races". In their *Indigenous Races of the Earth before Origin of Species* (1850), Josiah Clark Nott and George Robins Gliddon implied that "negroes" were a creational rank between "Greeks" (considered the beginning of western European culture) and chimpanzees. Non-white people were kept in zoo cages during colonial exhibitions promoting the benefits of white colonialism to such colored peoples.

A number of later writers, such as the French anthropologist Vacher de Lapouge in his book *L'Aryen*, argued that this superior human branch could be identified physically by using the cephalic index (a measure of head shape) and other indicators. He argued that the long-headed "dolichocephalic-blond" Europeans, characteristically found in northern Europe, were natural leaders, destined to rule over more "brachiocephalic" (short headed) peoples.

In the United States, scientific racism justified Black African slavery against the moral opposition to the Atlantic slave trade. Alexander Thomas and Samuel Sillen described black men as uniquely fitted for bondage because of their "primitive psychological organization". In 1851, in antebellum Louisiana, the

physician Samuel A. Cartwright (1793–1863) diagnosed slave escape attempts as “drapetomania”, a treatable mental illness, writing that “with proper medical advice, strictly followed, this troublesome practice that many Negroes have of running away can be almost entirely prevented”. After the Civil War, Southern (Confederacy) physicians wrote textbooks of “scientific racism” based upon studies claiming that black freemen (ex-slaves) were becoming extinct because they were inadequate to the demands of being a free man, implying that black people actually benefited from enslavement. But this was just the pseudo-scientific attempt to rationalize a racist prejudice that has even older roots in a specific "theological" dogma from the Catholic church, officialized in the 1200s in Italy by Thomas Aquinas (who was made a saint for it). Thomas Aquinas' theory, which became the official theological position of the church and therefore the rationale of the colonial expansion ordered by the popes, was that black peoples had a kind of "second class" soul, therefore they could be killed, mistreated, exploited, robbed, enslaved and denied all power and dignity, even after being converted to Christianity.

The second part of the verse explains that the *varna* system does not apply to the Divine Principle or to the eligibility for spiritual realization - as Krishna will confirm again in 9.32.

VERSE 14

न मां कर्माणि लिम्पन्ति न मे कर्मफले स्पृहा ।

na mām karmāṇi limpanti na me karmaphale spṛhā ।

इति मां योऽभिजानाति कर्माभिर्न स बध्यते ॥ ४-१४ ॥

iti mām yo'bhijānāti karmabhirna sa badhyate ।। 4-14 ।।

na: not; *mam*: me; *karmani*: the activities; *limpanti*: taint/ affect; *na*: not; *me*: me; *karma-phale*: by the results of the actions; *spriha*: touch; *iti*: thus; *mam*: me; *yah*: one who; *abhijanati*: knows; *karmabhih*: by the actions; *na*: not; *sah*: s/he; *badhyate*: is bound.

"I am not affected by action and I am not touched by the results of the action. One who really understands this (fact) is not bound by actions either."

In the previous verse Krishna said, *tasya kartaram api mam viddhy akartaram avyayam*: "although I am their maker, know that I am unchangeable and detached from action". This concept is repeated and expanded in this verse, and connects it with verse 4.10, that declared, *bahavo jnana-tapasa puta mad-bhavam agatah*, "Many who were purified by austerities and knowledge attained my realization".

There is a certain cultural terrorism going on in some schools of thought, where members are anxious to show that they are situated on the highest possible level of realization - Bhagavan - and therefore they tend to slide in the unnecessary excess of despising the so-called "inferior levels" of Brahman and Paramatma.

The fact is, that without attaining the Brahman and Paramatma realization (realizing in theory and practice that we are spirit souls and not the material body, and that God lives in the heart of each living being), the so-called "Bhagavan realization" will be simply be an arrogant and fraudulent mockery, a mental fantasy, a sentimental exercise, and, as clearly stated by the famous *bhakti* expert Rupa Gosvami, "an unnecessary disturbance to society".

There is no real contradiction between the so-called personalist and impersonalist views, because God is at the same time inconceivably personal and impersonal.

If we think we are supposed to "take sides" to pledge allegiance to a "personal God" against the "impersonal Brahman" we are simply demonstrating our ignorance and illusion.

Bhagavata Purana (1.2.11) clearly explains that Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavan are one *tattva* (Reality) only.

In fact, *Gita* (18.54) clearly says that the true *bhakti* can only be achieved from the level of Brahman and Paramatma realization.

So, without the fear of "making offenses to Bhagavan" by accepting the level of Brahman realization, we can allow our intelligence to contemplate the idea that the realization of our true eternal spiritual nature of Atman/ Brahman enables us to enter the same nature (*bhava*) of the Personality of Godhead.

From this position we will really be able to serve him with love and devotion, free from separatist considerations and independent desires.

This realization, achieved in this same lifetime, in this world, will enable us to work at the proper performance of our duties without getting entangled in the results of the activities, as Krishna has already explained in previous verses.

With reference to the system of *varnas*, this means that by remaining free from the delusion of being the *karta*, or doer - in other words, giving up the *ahankara* or false identification with the material body - each member of society can function properly but without remaining tied to the particular position.

Krishna does not feel diminished by such a comparison between himself and the ordinary human beings, since he has already declared that he willingly engages in work in the prescribed way just for the purpose of giving a good example to the people.

VERSE 15

एवं ज्ञात्वा कृतं कर्म पूर्वैरपि मुमुक्षुभिः ।

evam jñātvā kṛtaṁ karma pūrvairapi mumukṣubhiḥ ।

कुरु कर्मैव तस्मात्त्वं पूर्वैः पूर्वतरं कृतम् ॥ ४-१५ ॥

kuru karmaiva tasmāttvaṁ pūrvaiḥ pūrvataram kṛtam ॥ 4-15 ॥

evam: thus; *jñatva*: knowing; *kritam*: performed; *karma*: action/ work/ duties; *purvaiḥ*: previously; *api*: even; *mumukshubhiḥ*: those who desired liberation; *kuru*: do; *karma*: work/ duty/ action; *eva*: certainly; *tasmāt*: therefore; *tvam*: you; *purvaiḥ*: by the ancient; *purvataram*: in ancient times; *kritam*: performed.

"Knowing this (fact), those who in the previous ages desired to attain liberation engaged in action. Therefore you should perform your duty just like the ancients did."

In this verse Krishna confirms once again that the path of *yoga* has been successfully practiced since very ancient times. He has already said that the proper knowledge of *yoga* had been lost since ancient times (4.2) and therefore there was a need to return to the original ancient ways.

This is also the need of the hour today. There is no need to speculate and invent new religions or new methods; we simply need to rediscover the original source and follow it properly. We should learn at least the basics before we try to reinvent the wheel. The idea of history as a linear progress of mankind, taught in mainstream academia, is openly refuted in this verse. There is in fact a linear evolution, but it applies to each individual irrespective of the greater cycle of the universe and the other beings.

Mankind in a general collective sense proceeds in cycles, with a tendency towards degradation from one age to the other (from

Satya to Kali) rather than towards progress, contrarily to what mainstream academia believes, and different levels of technology and lifestyles can remain simultaneously present even for very long periods of time.

The so-called evolution of the species did not produce a biosphere composed only by human beings: the most elementary forms of life continued and continue to exist in spite of their “inferiority”. Even different human species may have co-existed simultaneously in different regions, or even in the same region, just like up to recent times different human groups co-existed on the planet although with very different lifestyles that could be categorized from the Paleolithic to the nuclear and space age.

Many forms of life may become extinct for some time, but that has nothing to do with evolution. The idea of the survival of the fittest works only if we understand that history does not have a linear progress. So at times even advanced forms of life or even advanced civilizations became extinct because the conditions on the planet changed - not necessarily producing better species or civilizations, as we can see in practice today. So it is very much possible that the “fittest” forms of life in a future degraded environment will be the most primitive and “unevolved”, contrarily to what most “scientists” think today.

The present dominant civilization is certainly not the most advanced that has ever appeared on this planet - on the contrary, it is a blatant failure - a mess of sufferings, degradation, and genetic degeneration without ethical values or higher aspirations.

Anthropologists object that there is no evidence of previous technologically advanced civilizations, but apart from the fact that absence of proof is not proof of absence, they are searching for the wrong relics. Large garbage disposals of artificial non-biodegradable consumers' goods, high percentages of pollutants

and the multiplication of diseases and genetic degradation are hardly signs of a successful advanced civilization, and neither are huge buildings or burials of dead bodies.

An advanced civilization may choose to burn the dead and disperse the ashes, to build small, environment-friendly and bio-degradable housing, or to develop the natural faculties of the human body and brain rather than depending on artificial surrogates consisting of mechanical machines.

Again, this verse confirms that Knowledge and Action are not incompatible; rather, a person who has the proper knowledge and aspires to liberation must continue to sincerely perform his duties.

There is no excuse for trying to escape one's duties. The myth of the "lazy *brahmana*" needs to be exposed as an extremely dangerous delusion.

Foolish and ignorant persons consider themselves very intelligent and advanced because they always try to abstain from ordinary work, and demand extravagant luxury in their maintenance at the expenses of the general population, claiming that they are situated on the highest platform of human life through renunciation.

Such parasites should be rejected and abandoned immediately. If they are truly renounced, they will content themselves of some leftovers begged from door to door.

Liberation - *moksha* - consists in being equally disposed and happy in any condition of life, as opposed to the "conditioned souls" that can be happy only in some particular *conditions* where they get what they like and do not get what they do not like.

VERSE 16

किं कर्म किमकर्मेति कवयोऽप्यत्र मोहिताः ।

kiṁ karma kimakarmeti kavayo'pyatra mohitāḥ ।

तत्ते कर्म प्रवक्ष्यामि यज्ज्ञात्वा मोक्षयसेऽशुभात् ॥ ४-१६ ॥

tatte karma pravakṣyāmi yajñātvā mokṣayase'śubhāt ।। 4-16 ।।

kim: what; *karma*: action; *kim*: what; *akarma*: *akarma*; *iti*: thus; *kavayah*: the learned; *api*: even; *atra*: in this (matter); *mohitah*: are confused; *tat*: that; *te*: to you; *karma*: (about) *karma*; *pravakshyami*: I will tell; *yat*: which; *jnatva*: knowing; *mokshyase*: you will be liberated; *asubhat*: from inauspiciousness.

"Even scholars are (sometimes) confused about what is *karma* and what is *akarma*. I will (now) tell you this (knowledge of) *karma*, by knowing which you will become free from inauspiciousness."

The words *karma*, *vikarma* and *akarma* describe respectively the prescribed /positive action, the forbidden/ negative action and the selfless/ dutiful activity that does not generate binding reactions of any kind. It is not easy to recognize which is which, because sometimes a drastic action is required to safeguard a higher good, as for example when a *kshatriya* confronts a criminal in a fierce fight to defend innocent people.

Also, it is difficult to judge when an action is performed in a totally selfless and enlightened consciousness, because some material selfish motivation may still be present in some altruistic activity, as for example when a person distributes charity to the needy in order to get religious merits and be admitted to heaven.

And similarly, a person may appear to be very entangled in activities related to family and work and anxious to make money,

but his consciousness may well be on a higher level of renunciation and selfless dedication to duty, without any attachment to his own personal benefit or gratification.

A famous commentator argues that prescribed action is recognized by the approval or order of the authorities in a religious lineage, but simultaneously offers the example of Arjuna, who received direct instructions from the Lord. This apparent contradiction is resolved by understanding that such authorities should be genuinely self-realized; in which case their instructions are not different from the direct instructions of Krishna in *Gita*.

It is perfectly true that we need to associate with expert and self-realized persons - the *sadhus* - in order to learn the practical applications of the spiritual knowledge, but we need to be very careful not to fall in the trap of cheaters.

Besides the help we can get from the direct association with self-realized souls, that can explain theory and practice in details, we can also get our examples from the stories of the persons we find in the traditional *shastra*, especially the *Puranas* and *Itihasas*, and also in the *Upanishads* etc.

In this way, extensive study of the original texts can take us beyond the theoretical academic level to the practical level, where we will be able to directly associate with those great personalities.

The word *kavi* means "poet" and "scholar" and refers to a very learned person. As we have already seen, mere scholarship is not sufficient to realize Truth: we need to actually put knowledge in practice and behave consistently with it.

The words *subha* and *asubha* respectively indicate the good/ favorable/ auspicious results/ reactions and the bad /unfavorable/ inauspicious results/ reactions.

VERSE 17

कर्मणो ह्यपि बोद्धव्यं बोद्धव्यं च विकर्मणः ।

karmaṇo hyapi boddhavyaṁ boddhavyaṁ ca vikarmaṇaḥ ।

अकर्मणश्च बोद्धव्यं गहना कर्मणो गतिः ॥ ४-१७ ॥

akarmaṇaśca boddhavyaṁ gahanā karmaṇo gatiḥ ॥ 4-17 ॥

karmanah: of the (prescribed) actions; *hi:* certainly; *api:* also; *boddhavyam:* to be understood; *boddhavyam:* to be understood; *ca:* and; *vikarmanah:* of bad action; *akarmanah:* of non-action; *ca:* and; *boddhavyam:* to be understood; *gahana:* very difficult; *karmanah:* of the actions; *gatih:* the purpose/ the true nature.

"It is important to understand (the meaning of) *karma* and (the meaning of) *vikarma*, and even more difficult, (the meaning of) *akarma* (within) the *karma*."

The word *karma* has entered the vocabulary of all the modern languages and has become a household word, but often its meaning is distorted due to cultural superimpositions and lack of proper information. It is generally used with the meaning of "destiny", and sometimes "retribution" or punishment.

In abrahamic cultures, this destiny is the "lot in life" incomprehensibly assigned by a tyrannical God to each individual at birth, and that must be accepted without discussion and without attempting to improve one's situation. To this fatalistic interpretation of Destiny, the concept of reincarnation, and "'*karma* from the past" adds the idea that the good or bad actions we performed in previous lifetimes come back to us in the form of reward or punishment, in a sort of "tit for tat" reaction that was also described in some versions of abrahamic hells.

However, *karma* is not just an inevitable sentence we simply need to storm out in a passive and fatalistic way.

Karma is constantly changing with each action (or inaction) of ours, and can even be neutralized or overcome completely by new and suitable actions, as people usually want to get rid of the "bad *karma*" (but don't mind getting some "'good *karma*").

The Scriptures and Tradition recommend good activities such as executing sacred rituals of purification (*prayaschitta*), worshipping God, going to pilgrimage, bathing in sacred *tirthas*, distributing charity to deserving persons, selflessly performing deeds for the benefit of all and sacrificing one's possessions for good causes, engaging in austerities (such as fasting etc), or simply renouncing one's material identification and attachments.

In this verse Krishna continues to give us the transcendental knowledge that needs to support our devotion and surrender to God. If we are really surrendered devotees, we must make a serious effort to understand and practice these instructions. If we don't, we are just cheap pretenders and charlatans, or just deluded imaginative wannabes.

We have already seen in many verses that a soul pursuing liberation and even a liberated soul must continue to work sincerely by performing the prescribed dutiful actions: this is called *karma*. When we speak of "*karmis*", the actual meaning of the definition refers to the persons that perform their prescribed duties, as strongly recommended by Krishna all along the *Gita*. Of course some people will give a different interpretation to the word (usually "those who are attached to the results of the action"), but that does not change the actual facts and meaning of the word.

To give a very prosaic example, traditionally in India people did not know oranges, so they called "oranges" the tangerines, a

similar fruit that has always had a great diffusion there. With the greater variety of produce now available on markets in Indian metropolises, now people are starting to understand the difference. Similarly in Italy people had never seen corn before it was imported from the Americas, so they called it "Turkish wheat" although it had absolutely nothing to do with Turkey. Later with the development of literacy and proper information the misconception was cleared, so this wonderful grain came to be called with the more appropriate name of "*maize*".

Thus when we speak of *karma*, *karmi* or *karma-kanda* (the section of the *Vedas* that gives instructions on prescribed duties) we should be very careful not to load any negative meaning into the expression. Nobody is "above the *karma kanda*": not even a liberated soul. It is true that in the end of the *Gita* Krishna will say, *sarva dharman parityajya mam ekam saranam vraja*, "leave all *dharmas* behind and simply surrender to me", but this instruction must be understood after having properly assimilated all the previous instructions given by Krishna in the other 700 verses.

Taking such instruction out of context and using it to rationalize our bad behavior and laziness is certainly not what Krishna is recommending.

VERSE 18

कर्मण्यकर्म यः पश्येदकर्माणि च कर्म यः ।

karmaṇyakarma yaḥ paśyedakarmaṇi ca karma yaḥ ।

स बुद्धिमान्मनुष्येषु स युक्तः कृत्स्नकर्मकृत् ॥ ४-१८ ॥

sa buddhimānmanuṣyeṣu sa yuktaḥ kṛtsnakarmakṛt ॥ 4-18 ॥

karmani: (in) the actions; *akarma*: non-action; *yah*: one who; *pasyet*: sees/ finds; *akarmani*: (in) non-actions; *ca*: and; *karma*: (as) action; *yah*: s/he; *sah*: s/he; *buddhiman*: intelligent; *manusyesu*: among human beings; *sah*: s/he; *yuktah*: engaged (in Yoga); *kritsna-karma-krit*: who performs activities.

"One who can see *akarma* within the *karma*, and the *karma* within the *akarma*, is intelligent among the human beings, and is performing all dutiful activities by engaging in *yoga*."

In this verse Krishna gives further explanation on *karma*.

The first thing we need to understand is that superficial appearances can be illusory. For example, when a boat is moving, the trees on the bank of the river appear to be moving although they are actually stationary, while when we observe a moving thing from a great distance, it appears as non-moving.

When we see a person who is performing an action or abstaining from action, we need to examine the situation carefully to really understand what it is about, because it is the motivation and the identification that bring about the results at karmic level.

It is important to understand that "the results of the action" become a matter of bondage only when we claim them for our selfish enjoyment: there is absolutely nothing wrong or enslaving in working properly in order to produce good results in a selfless consciousness, for the benefit of society or for the pleasure of God.

The key concept in this verse is that, in a selfish approach, both engagement and non-engagement in action are choices that cause bondage, while the selfless approach keeps us free from bondage both in engagement and non-engagement in action.

We can therefore study the four possible choices in the same scenario:

1. selfish performance of an action, such as killing an innocent person to misappropriate his legitimate wealth, to which we have no title,
2. selfish non-performance of an action, such as failing to protect an innocent person from the aggression of a criminal that wants to kill him (obviously one wants to avoid getting hurt in the process),
3. selfless non-performance of an action, such as abstaining from attacking an innocent person that is carrying wealth, although personally we might be in a disadvantaged financial position (and would like to have that money),
4. selfless performance of an action, such as protecting an innocent person from the aggression of a criminal, without expecting any reward.

Abstaining from a prescribed action out of selfish considerations is actually a precise choice that will bring negative consequences, while performing a prescribed action without selfish motives does not entail karmic reactions and therefore it is called *akarma*.

Let us now introduce the "transcendental" factor into the equation.

Unfortunately, some people believe that by superficially wearing some "I am transcendental" badge, cap or T-shirt, or by carrying a "transcendental club" or "transcendental party" membership card - so to speak - they can afford to commit the most heinous crimes and merrily get away with it, much like a bad corrupt policeman may convince himself that his uniform will legitimately give him a free hand and protection from prosecution for any criminal activity. The disastrous results of such delusional mentality are there for all to see.

Working on the level of transcendental consciousness actually means that one is ready to equally face or tolerate joys and

sorrows, gain and loss, success or failure; only in this way one becomes free from the results of the actions.

On an even deeper level, one who knows the *tattva* of Atman/ Brahman understands that *akarma*, the true absence of action or inaction, is in the Self (unborn, unchangeable, omnipresent, eternally pure and characterized by perfect knowledge/ awareness and bliss), while *karma* is a superimposition due to the Self being embodied. At such an advanced level we do not even contemplate *vikarma*, because all sinful activities have long been left behind as the purified living entity has lost all traces of selfishness.

One who understands this principle, being firmly situated in the realization of the Self (Atman/ Brahman) will see that he is actually not acting, as only the body, senses and mind are engaged in their prescribed duties, at the level of their capabilities.

The conclusion of the verse is particularly important.

The expression *kritsna karma krit* further stresses Krishna's instruction as already repeated several times earlier: the soul that seeks liberation and even the liberated soul must continue to work selflessly performing the proper duties, but without a selfish sense of proprietorship, identification or attachment.

VERSE 19

यस्य सर्वे समारम्भाः कामसङ्कल्पवर्जिताः ।

yasya sarve samārambhāḥ kāmasaṅkalpavarjitāḥ ।

ज्ञानान्निदग्धकर्माणं तमाहुः पण्डितं बुधाः ॥ ४-१९ ॥

jñānāgnidagdhakarmāṇam tamāhuḥ paṇḍitam budhāḥ ॥ 4-19 ॥

yasya: of one who; *sarve*: all; *samarambhah*: attempts; *kama*: desire; *sankalpa*: intention; *varjitah*: given up; *jnana*: of knowledge; *agni*: by the fire; *dagdha*: burned; *karmanam*: the actions; *tam*: him/ her; *ahuh*: it is said; *panditam*: a *pandita*; *budhah*: intelligent.

"Those who are intelligent declare that a truly learned person is one who has left behind all ventures based on the determination for personal sense pleasure and has thus burned all his *karma* (to ashes) by the fire of knowledge."

The word *pandita* (or its Anglicized distortion *pundit*) has entered the vocabulary of many languages, generally with the correct meaning of "learned scholar, expert", although generally in material subjects. Just as in the west family names are still used to designate a non-qualified or non-practicing descendant of a person who originally earned the title (for example Bakers, Smith, Potter, etc), in India "Pandit" or "Panda" (just like "Acharya", "Gosvami" etc) is still used as family name even for people who have no such qualification and may even be totally illiterate and ignorant, and/or addicted to negative adharmic behaviors and conclusions. This is rather confusing, especially when such unqualified people expect to be automatically considered qualified because of their ascendancy and the family name they use.

This is not happening in the west: no Bakers, Smiths or Potters, for example, can present themselves as automatically qualified to bake good bread, produce metal instruments or to manufacture pottery by dint of their family name only.

The best solution would be to return to the original and genuine use of the definition, encouraging the individuals that are "differently able or qualified" to change their surname or family name to a more appropriate description of their role in society.

In Vedic society, this responsibility rests in the hands of the Guru that trains the young students in the Gurukula and assigns them a proper name/ title, as well as in the hands of the King that employs or recognizes the individual according to the particular skills and activities, and in the hands of the Assembly of the Brahmanas, that has both the power to ostracize unqualified and degraded members of a *varna*, and the power to acknowledge officially the evolution of a qualified individual to a *varna* of greater responsibility.

In all such cases, the recognition is officialized by some public rituals, not unlike the modern "award ceremonies" or "graduation/ doctorate ceremonies" by which a deserving individual receives a title that declares his merits.

Another translation of the verse applies the word *varjitah* ("given up") to the actions (*samarambhah*) rather than to the person (*panditah*); the resultant version is, "Intelligent people say that a knowledgeable person is one whose actions are devoid of desires and intentions; this fire of knowledge has burned all his actions".

The expression *sama arambhah* indicates the actions undertaken with the determination to obtain a specific purpose; this specific purpose is called *sankalpa*. Both these terms are characteristically used in the ritual ceremonies of *karma kanda*.

The *sankalpa* is the declaration in which the *karta*, the "doer" of the ritual (assisted by the officiating priests) expresses the purpose for which the ritual is performed. The *sankalpa*, or the determination to achieve a particular object, is the seed of *kama*, or desire, because through the *sankalpa* our mind gives the permission to the desire to start developing.

The image of the fire, too, is characteristic of the fire ritual that constitutes the basis for the *karma kanda* rituals; the *homa* or fire sacrifice mainly consists in offering clarified butter and grains into

the sacred fire with *mantras* that address the various Personalities of Godhead for whom the oblations are meant.

This verse explains a further level of meaning in the fire sacrifice: while burning the oblations, we are also supposed to offer our desires and intentions, our identifications and attachments, to the Supreme Personality of Godhead in the fire of Knowledge. Then everything we do, everything we obtain or do not obtain will be sanctified, accepted as the reciprocation of the Divine, and there will be no reason for fear. The action of burning something in the fire is an extremely powerful archetypal symbol of renunciation, liberation, and purification.

What happens when we leave our *kama* and *sankalpa* behind us? We are simply left with the performance of our sacred duty or sacrifice and its sanctified fruits - *yajna sista*, or *prasadam*.

VERSE 20

त्यक्त्वा कर्मफलासङ्गं नित्यतृप्तो निराश्रयः ।

tyaktvā karmaphalāsaṅgaṁ nityatṛpto nirāśrayaḥ ।

कर्मण्यभिप्रवृत्तोऽपि नैव किञ्चित्करोति सः ॥ ४-२० ॥

karmaṇyabhipravṛtto'pi naiva kiñcitkaroti saḥ ॥ 4-20 ॥

tyaktva: having given up; *karma*: of the action; *phala*: the fruits; *sangam*: attachment to/ association with; *nitya*: always; *triptah*: satisfied; *nir*: without; *asrayah*: shelter; *karmani*: in work; *abhipravrittah*: fully engaged (like before); *api*: although; *na*: not; *eva*: certainly; *kincit*: anything; *karoti*: does; *sah*: s/he.

"Such a person has given up all connections with the results of the actions, is always satisfied and does not depend on anyone

else. Although s/he is always engaged in activities, s/he is never doing anything."

The word *sangam* means "association", "attachment" and indicates a permanent tie, something that expresses some identification.

The expression *nirashrayah*, "without shelter", is about self-reliance, being ready to face any situation and able to see everything in the Greater Picture. Even when we take shelter in God, it should not be as whimpering babies or as lazy passengers of a taxi; surrender must be active rather than passive. Surrender in action means positively engaging in doing our work properly. Again, Krishna repeats that being free from *karma* - actions and reactions - does not mean abstaining from the proper performance of one's duty, but simply continuing to do one's work in the most dedicated way, but without the intention of enjoying the results, without the identification as the cause of the action or the attachment to the action itself.

In other words, a liberated person does his best and leaves the rest to the Divine Plan, accepting whatever results come from the action as a gift from God. This feeling of surrender also extends to one's own maintenance, because although everyone is entitled to get their personal needs satisfied, a devotee is not anxious or overly attached to securing things or benefits or protecting them once he has obtained them. If he can't get them or he loses them, he understands that everything happens according to the Divine Plan, and there must be a very good reason for that.

There is a very interesting story. Two friends were walking near a forest, and one of the two lamented about a small accident he had a few days earlier, in which he had lost a finger of his hand. The other man insisted that everything happens for the better, according to the Divine Plan. The first man became annoyed and, seeing an old dried well, he threw his companion into it, angrily asking him

whether he believed that such an event would be according to the Divine Plan, too. Then he returned back to his village, but on the way he was ambushed and captured by some thugs seeking a sacrificial victim for a ghost they worshiped. However, as soon as the thugs saw that his hand was missing a finger, they decided that his body was imperfect and thus not fit for the sacrifice and they let him go. Shaken, the man returned to the dried well and rescued his friend, recognizing that indeed if he had not lost that finger he would have been killed. However he still had doubts; he asked his friend how being thrown into a well had been good for him, and he replied that since he personally still had all his fingers intact, the thugs would have had no objection in sacrificing him instead.

VERSE 21

निराशीर्यतचित्तात्मा त्यक्तसर्वपरिग्रहः ।

nirāśīryatacittātmā tyaktasarvaparigrahaḥ ।

शारीरं केवलं कर्म कुर्वन्नाप्नोति किल्बिषम् ॥ ४-२१ ॥

śārīraṁ kevalaṁ karma kurvannāpnoti kilbiṣam ॥ 4-21 ॥

nirasih: without desires/ solicitations; *yata:* controlled; *citta:* consciousness; *atma:* self; *tyakta:* having given up; *sarva:* all; *parigrahaḥ:* sense of possession/ accepting; *sariram:* body; *kevalam:* only; *karma:* work; *kurvan:* doing; *na:* not; *apnoti:* obtains; *kilbisham:* sinful reaction.

"One who works without (selfish) desires, in fully controlled consciousness, giving up all sense of possession, and only performing those activities that are required for the (proper maintenance of the) body/ performing the activities with the

body only (without sense of identification and attachment), never incurs negative reactions although he engages in activities."

The expression *sariram kevalam karma* carries two levels of meanings, namely 1) working for the proper maintenance of one's body, and 2) engaging body, mind and senses in work without developing a sense of identification and attachment to the actions. The negative reactions refer to the contamination caused by the inevitable acts of violence that are required in all occupations for the protection of society.

Modern consumeristic society gives great importance to entertainment and fun and leisure, and presents work as a painful and primitive activity that we should minimize as much as possible in order to enjoy a really progressive, civilized life. The roots of this misconception, however, go much deeper into the history of western civilization, with a rigid division of classes - the commoners and the aristocrats - based on the Christian ideology.

The ancient Romans employed slaves in their Imperial period, starting a short time before Christianity (from 27 BCE to 393 CE); in the beginning these were usually petty criminals or debtors unable to pay their creditors, abandoned illegitimate children, as well as prisoners of war or individuals already made slaves previously, generally by specialized Arab traders that had been raiding the Mediterranean and Africa for slaves since the times of the Phoenicians.

However, a slave or a son/ daughter of slave parents could earn their freedom by demonstrating qualities and behaviors that would make them useful and respectable members of the society. Such freed slaves were called "*liberti*". This liberality was frowned upon by the Christian clergy, and was lost with the spreading of Christianity.

According to the main apostle of the Roman Church, “saint” Paul, slavery was a very good thing ordained by God, and society was supposed to be divided into masters (whose authority came from God himself, through the pope and the priests) and servants (who were expected to remain in servitude permanently, generation after generation).

When Christianity succeeded in becoming the absolute power in the Roman empire, Rome fell and western society crumbled into small isolated settlements, each protected by small kings and their vassals. Slavery proper became less practical, because it was more convenient for the king's vassals and the priests to utilize the general people as servants without having to purchase or feed them. The condition of "serf of the land" was also permanent as "ordained by God", and the peasants or commoners had no rights whatsoever.

It was only with the French Revolution that the divine authority of the clergy and aristocrats on the commoners was challenged; however the equality among men newly established in society only meant that all men were entitled to "seek happiness" through sense gratification, entertainment and wealth, trying to work as little as possible. A bourgeois or middle class developed, and subsequently with the industrial and socialist revolutions the laborer class or proletariat kept shrinking and demanding more wealth, leisure time and benefits, to be gradually (ideally) helped by machineries, that would substitute the humans in slavery.

This legitimate struggle to stop social injustice and exploitation, however, did not do much (if anything) to recognize a moral value to the honest work in a social occupation, because according to the abrahamic fundamental ideology, work is nothing but a curse cast on man by God when he kicked out Adam from the Garden of Eden. The Vedic perspective is diametrically opposite, as *Gita* is very clearly explaining: work is a sacred duty that connects the

human beings - from the ordinary to the liberated, up to the Devas and the Supreme Personality of Godhead himself in a conscious cooperation for the sustenance of the universe.

Unfortunately, the poisonous abrahamic influence has infiltrated even Indian society, weakening and almost destroying the ethic value of work, so much that the original *varna* system became totally confused, fragmenting the three higher *varnas* into hundreds of meaningless racial or ethnic sub-castes, moving *sudras* to the position of foremen and accountants rather than laborers and inventing a new fifth caste of *dalits* used as slaves by the rest of the society - a position that is never once mentioned in the Vedic system.

In imitation of the aristocratic and priestly classes of their abrahamic invaders (both Muslim and Christian), the *brahmanas* and *kshatriyas* of India embraced the misconception that the hallmark of a "high class" person is to work as little as possible, rather having others work for him.

Similarly, a devious equation brought the Christian "monk" ideal as the new model for the ancient tradition of *sannyasa*, and the disaster was complete. To compound and aggravate the situation, the exploitation rationale enforced by colonial regime further disconnected people from the just pride one should have in his own work, because all peoples subjected to a foreign rule quickly develop the tendency of not accumulating wealth or good things that will only attract the attention of the invaders.

In this distorted perspective, a person who has lost the real understanding of the Vedic ethics of work might interpret this verse as encouraging laziness and neglect in one's social occupations - just do the minimum to survive - but this would be a serious mistake.

The proper maintenance of one's body and its extensions the family members should be measured according to the Vedic standard of civilized life that is definitely on a higher level than people usually think. To get an idea of the level of quality of life that an average person would enjoy in Vedic society, we can have a look at the actual original text of the *Kama sutras* (not the later editions manipulated by the Arab invaders mostly interested in imaginative and often perverted gross sex).

VERSE 22

यदृच्छालाभसन्तुष्टो द्वन्द्वातीतो विमत्सरः ।

yadṛcchālābhasantuṣṭo dvandvātīto vimatsarah |

समः सिद्धावसिद्धौ च कृत्वापि न निबध्यते ॥ ४-२२ ॥

samah siddhāvasiddhau ca kṛtvāpi na nibadhyate || 4-22 ||

yadriccha: of its own accord; *labha*: obtained; *santushtah*: satisfied; *dvandva*: duality; *atitah*: gone beyond; *vimatsarah*: free from envy; *samah*: equally stable; *siddhau*: in success; *asiddhau*: in failure; *ca*: and; *kṛtvā*: doing; *api*: although; *na*: not; *nibadhyate*: is bound.

"(Such person) is perfectly satisfied with whatever s/he obtains naturally, is free from duality and envy, and is balanced in success and failure. Although engaged in activities, he is never bound (by them)."

When a society is organized on the foundations of honest work and cooperation, there is no waste and there are no blockages of wealth due to undue and unnecessary accumulation, and each individual naturally obtains everything he needs for himself and his family.

This is the natural order of things: every living entity has the fundamental right to a decent livelihood. If this is not happening, it means that there is a serious problem at the leadership level - the king is unworthy, the *brahmana* advisors are not qualified, the *vaisyas* are not doing their work properly.

The greater responsibility lies with the higher classes of society, and ultimately to the highest class of all, the *brahmanas*, who are supposed to give the proper directions to everybody else. If they are unable to do their job because of personal lack of *guna* and *karma*, they should step down and engage in the work they are actually qualified for.

In the previous verses we have seen that the mass of the people will naturally follow the example set by the leaders. When the *brahmanas* behave properly and properly guide the *kshatriyas* and the *vaisyas*, there is no reason why the mass of the people should not behave in a good way, too. So the blame lies square and fair on the door of the *brahmanas*.

There are still some qualified members of this class, and they should take up the responsibility to clarify the principles of religion to the leaders of society - by precept and by example - and publicly ostracize those leaders that do not respond adequately, substituting them with more qualified individuals, without being obstructed by birth prejudices.

In the meantime, we need to carefully observe the actual situation in society and apply the good instructions to the particular circumstances, but even in an emergency situation like the present one, we can always take pride in our honest work, watch out for good opportunities and manage a decent maintenance with whatever money can come. In this particular context, duality refers to pleasurable and unpleasant, gainful or ungainful, successful or unsuccessful - in other words, without considering our personal

selfish gratification. We need to do our work even when it is not so pleasurable or easy.

Regarding the renounced persons who subsist on alms, the rules require a *sannyasi* to accept whatever is given without asking for specific foods, provided it is not given in an abusive or spiteful way and it has not fallen on the ground. The food should be collected from six or seven houses without a specific plan and without choosing them on the basis of the wealth of their residents.

VERSE 23

गतसङ्गस्य मुक्तस्य ज्ञानावस्थितचेतसः ।

gatasangasya muktasya jñānāvasthitacetasaḥ ।

यज्ञायाचरतः कर्म समग्रं प्रविलीयते ॥ ४-२३ ॥

yajñāyācarataḥ karma samagraṁ praviliyate ॥ 4-23 ॥

gata: having gone away; *sangasya*: of one who attachments; *muktasya*: of one who is free; *jñāna*: knowledge; *avasthita*: situated; *cetasaḥ*: whose consciousness; *yajñaya*: to Yajna (Vishnu)/ to the sacrifice; *acarataḥ*: performing action/ working; *karma*: activities; *samagram*: the total; *praviliyate*: becomes destroyed.

"One who has finished with all associations/ whose association is liberated and whose consciousness is firmly established in knowledge, worships Yajna (Vishnu) in practice (through his actions/ as all his actions become devotional service)/ works in a spirit of sacrifice. The entirety of his *karma* (reactions to actions) is thus destroyed."

The word *mukta* ("liberated, free") comes from the same root of the word *moksha* ("liberation"); a *jivan mukta* is a liberated person who is still living in a material body in this world.

The meanings of the word *sanga* ("association") expand to all the fields where the individual associates himself with some kind of identification. It applies to the people he keeps company with, to the organizations he becomes member of, to the institutionalized religion he belongs to, and to the material lineage as in family, society etc. As we have already mentioned, one should either keep association with liberated persons, or become liberated from association and live alone (not only physically but ideologically, too).

The word *praviliyate*, "destroyed", comes from the same root as *pralaya*, the recurrent destruction of the universe in the cycle of creation, when the planets are submerged and destroyed.

The word *samagram*, "together with its consequences" is composed by *saha* ("together with") and *agrena* ("its consequences").

Another meaning of the word *praviliyate* is "merging into"; in this case it may apply to *karma samagram* to indicate "the entirety" – at various levels this may refer to the particular relationship (*sanga*) in which one is acting (friendship, occupation, family), or the society in general, or the entire universe, of which we all are parts.

At the highest level, it indicates God as the Ultimate Reality. In this perspective the meaning of the verse is "One who has finished with all associations and whose consciousness is firmly established in knowledge is engaged in the sacred offering of his actions to God, so his behavior is in complete accordance with the harmony of the universe/ the highest divine plan".

Another perspective on this verse is centered on the meaning of *karma* as "duty". According to the Vedic system called *karma mimamsa* or *purva mimamsa*, the proper performance of one's duty in a lifetime creates the suitable circumstances for a better birth in a next lifetime, either as a resident of the heavenly planets or as a member of a higher community in human society.

In this verse Krishna clearly states that such cycle of "good *karma*" is not the ultimate purpose of human life: at some point the progress of the individual takes him/ her on a higher level of knowledge and understanding, and helps him/ her to become detached from the temporary material identifications and associations (*gata sangasya muktasya*). At this point, a person becomes totally transcendental and sees all activities as complementary forms of service to the Lord: this is a definition of a Vaishnava, "a person who has realized Vishnu".

In the devotional service of the Lord there are no lower activities, and the highest *brahmanas* - those who have perfectly realized Brahman in full knowledge - are happy to offer menial service to the Deity, as in cleaning the altar, washing the body of the Deity, presenting the food, flower garlands and other items, and so on.

On this level, the definition of *karma* as "duty" in the religious and social observances becomes less and less important, because each individual will spontaneously and happily serve the Lord in whatever capacity will be required by the circumstances.

This *daivi varnashrama* is applicable only for those who have become totally free from any material identification, association and attachment, because even a small amount of material motivations or selfishness or ignorance will have disastrous consequences - even more so than in the case of *sannyasis* who disgrace their vows with inappropriate behaviors.

The definition of *vaishnava*, too, should be taken very seriously and not utilized to refer to cheap imitators, sectarian affiliations or to hereditary caste positions, even more so than the definition of *brahmana*, because a *vaishnava* is described as much more qualified than a *brahmana*, and consequently any inconsistencies with the descriptions found in the *shastra* will have disastrous consequences, at individual and collective level.

VERSE 24

ब्रह्मार्पणं ब्रह्म हविर्ब्रह्माग्नौ ब्रह्मणा हुतम् ।

brahmārpaṇam brahma havirbrahmāgnau brahmaṇā hutam ।

ब्रह्मैव तेन गन्तव्यं ब्रह्मकर्मसमाधिना ॥ ४-२४ ॥

brahmaiva tena gantavyam brahmakarmasamādhinā ॥ 4-24 ॥

brahma: Brahman; *arpanam*: the ladle/ the offering; *brahma*: Brahman; *havih*: the oblation (of clarified butter etc); *brahma*: Brahman; *agnau*: in the fire; *brahmana*: by one who knows Brahman; *hutam*: (is) poured (as offering); *brahma*: Brahman; *eva*: certainly; *tena*: by him; *gantavyam*: to be attained; *brahma*: Brahman; *karma*: activities; *samadhina*: in the *samadhi* (complete absorption).

"The purpose (of such actions) is transcendental, the offerings are transcendental, the fire is transcendental, the act of offering is transcendental, the goal to be attained is transcendental, and the consciousness is transcendental."

Krishna continues to explain that the real purpose of the daily religious duties is the worship of Vishnu, the Transcendental Reality, the Personification of Brahman of Supreme Spirit. And

whatever comes genuinely in touch with the Spirit becomes "spiritualized", acquiring the same characteristics and the same level of consciousness.

The word *Brahman* (meaning “transcendental, spiritual, divine”) is used in this verse to indicate the action itself, the ingredients or materials, the means, the end, the person who is acting, and the ultimate goal to be attained through the action. From the grammatical point of view, the five forms of accessories to the action are the nominative, objective, instrumental, dative and locative; in this case the sacrificer, the oblation, the ladle, the sacrificial fire and Brahman itself.

When our consciousness is firmly established on the spiritual/transcendental level, we become able to perceive the real spiritual nature of everything: *vasudeva sarvam iti* (7.19). The sacrificer is certainly Brahman because the real identity of the soul is transcendental, the purpose of the offering is Brahman because as *Gita* will say later (5.29), Brahman is *bhoktaram yajna tapasam*, or the beneficiary of all sacred activities. The act of offering itself is sacred, as *yajna* and *seva*, and everything connected to it becomes spiritualized and sacred, because it keeps us in touch with the transcendental consciousness that is Brahman, or *brahma-samadhi*.

Some commentators interpret this verse to mean that a *yogi* sacrifices the senses and the sense objects by abstaining from engaging the senses in the material sense objects; this contradicts the purpose of the verse and is actually faulty perception, as it proposes that the objects in this world cannot be offered in sacrifice, or seen as spiritual paraphernalia utilized in the service of the Supreme. In fact we need to understand that the proper performance of the sacrifice requires the offering of very specific substances, not the abstention of offerings. Of course there are several things that should not be offered in sacrifice - rather, the act of abstention from their contact becomes the offering.

These things are all those substances and activities that create obstacles towards the path of transcendental realization - Brahman realization.

When we speak of restraining the senses, this means utilizing them with a higher level of consciousness, that is the original and natural consciousness of the Atman/ Brahman.

Brahman covered by *maya* is known as *prakriti*, and when the consciousness is purified, *prakriti* is purely perceived as Brahman, and even the body is perceived as a sacred instrument for the worship of the Absolute. In such transcendental consciousness, the very act of perception of the objects not prohibited by the scriptures is considered a sacrifice, or sacred action.

Subsequent verses (4.33 and 4.39) will explain that knowledge considered as a sacrifice is greater than the sacrifices requiring materials, and that by achieving knowledge one attains supreme peace.

VERSE 25

दैवमेवापरे यज्ञं योगिनः पर्युपासते ।

daivamevāpare yajñam yoginaḥ paryupāsate ।

ब्रह्माग्नावपरे यज्ञं यज्ञेनैवोपजुह्वति ॥ ४-२५ ॥

brahmāgnāvapare yajñam yajñenaivopajuhvati ॥ 4-25 ॥

daivam: God /the sum total of the Devas; *eva*: certainly; *apare*: other; *yajnam*: sacrifice; *yoginah*: yogis; *paryupasate*: worships perfectly; *brahma*: Brahman; *agnau*: in the fire; *apare*: other; *yajnam*: sacrifice; *yajnena*: by the sacrifice; *eva*: certainly; *upajuhvati*: offers.

"Some *yogis* perform the *yajna* by perfectly worshiping the Devas, others perform sacrifice in the fire of Transcendence by offering sacrifice itself (as sacred action) as an oblation."

The sacred action (*yajna*) is not necessarily a strictly regulated religious ritual: every action in our life, from the simplest to the most complex, can become an act of sacrifice when we remain in the proper consciousness. Thus every word becomes a prayer, every step becomes a circumambulation of God's image, every morsel of food becomes the worship of God's mercy, every time we lay down becomes a prostration to God's feet, and every action becomes a sacred offering to God. Or, as Krishna will say later (9.27), "Whatever you do, eat, sacrifice, or give in charity, and whatever difficulty you face, offer everything to me as a sacred act of sacrifice."

What is the meaning of "offering sacrifice itself as an oblation"? It is about sacrificing the act of sacrifice itself, sacrificing the sense of doership, the false ego, in the fire of Brahman or Knowledge.

The tendency of the conditioned soul is to perform activities in order to get a selfish benefit from them - either at individual level or collective but separative level. This also applies to religious activities, such as *yajnas*, rituals etc.

This verse declares that we need to go beyond this selfish and materialistic consciousness, and attain that transcendental platform where all actions - what to speak of the religious rituals - are performed in a spirit of divine service to the Absolute.

Every step of our journey should be directed to help us attain the liberated stage of consciousness (*moksha*), where everything else is consumed in the fire of Brahman.

Who is a *yogi*? What is *yoga*? Certainly *yoga* is not about burning excess fat or becoming able to twist one's body like a pretzel. *Yoga*

means to unite with the Brahman consciousness, with the Absolute Reality.

VERSE 26

श्रोत्रादीनीन्द्रियाण्यन्ये संयमाग्निषु जुह्वति ।

śrotrādīnīndriyaṅyanye saṁyamāgniṣu juhvati ।

शब्दादीन्विषयानन्य इन्द्रियाग्निषु जुह्वति ॥ ४-२६ ॥

śabdādīnviṣayānanya indriyāgniṣu juhvati ॥ 4-26 ॥

srotra: the hearing power; *adini*: and so on; *indriyani*: the senses; *anye*: others; *samyama*: of restraint/ control; *agnishu*: in the fires; *juhvati*: offers; *sabda*: the sound; *adin*: and so on; *vishayan*: the sense objects; *anye*: others; *indriya*: of the senses; *agnishu*: in the fire; *juhvati*: offers.

"Others offer (the activities of) the senses, such as the hearing etc, in the fire of regulated activity/ abstinence, others offer the objects (of senses) such as the sound etc in the fire of the senses as an oblation."

This verse continues to elaborate on the higher and subtler level of worship that transforms every moment of our lives into a sacred meditation. In such a transcendental consciousness, every moment of time that is given to us, becomes a miracle of spiritual happiness and an opportunity to remember and serve the Divine.

In this sacred activity, the body of the worshiper becomes spiritualized by the constant flow of higher spiritual energy and becomes radiant and pure, vibrating the wonderful power of *suddha sattva*, transcendental goodness.

The practical process of *puja* is meant to train the worshiper in this personal evolution. Every time the Deity is offered worship, the *sadhaka* evokes the presence of the Deity from within his heart and installs it in the image on the altar, and applies the sacred *mantras* on his own body in order to spiritualize it. This particular process is called *nyasa*, and it is used on the various body parts and also separately on the fingers of the hands, that are the main instrument in the process of ritual worship.

In this verse, the word *agnisu* ("in the fires") is plural because the sacrifice is performed simultaneously with all the senses. The two modalities of sacred action described here are 1) abstinence or strict regulation of the sense activities, 2) offering the sense activities in the worship process.

The ancient tantric worship, especially in the *vamachara* or *kaulachara* tradition, takes this concept to the extreme application, transforming the most popular and powerful activities of sense gratification (sex, intoxication, food) into an act of sacrifice. Unfortunately some people - both in the west and in India - are trying to reduce this extremely difficult and dangerous practice into a cheap, exotic and pseudo-mystical excuse for uncontrolled sense gratification. This will only confuse the minds of the general people, taking them away from a serious and honest investigation about spiritual development.

VERSE 27

सर्वाणीन्द्रियकर्माणि प्राणकर्माणि चापरे ।

sarvāṅīndriyakarmāṇi prāṇakarmāṇi cāpare ।

आत्मसंयमयोगाग्नौ जुह्वति ज्ञानदीपिते ॥ ४-२७ ॥

ātmasaṁyamayogāgnau juhvati jñānadīpīte ॥ 4-27 ॥

sarvani: all; *indriya*: of the senses; *karmani*: the activities; *prana*: of the *prana*; *karmani*: activities; *ca*: and; *apare*: others; *atma*: self; *samyama*: controlled; *yoga*: of the *yoga*, *agnau*: in the fire; *juhvati*: offers; *jñana*: of the knowledge; *dipite*: with the lamp.

"Others offer all the activities of all the senses and the activities of the *prana*, and the oblation is constituted by the control of the self in the fire of *yoga* in the light of knowledge."

Krishna's explanation of the actual purpose of *yoga* is further elaborated in this verse.

What is *prana*? There is no western word that is exactly equivalent with the original Sanskrit definition. *Prana* is life air and energy; it is not contained only in air/ oxygen, but it is also carried by cosmic radiations and by the magnetic radiations of the living entities. However, the breathing pattern and speed are important for the life energy, as we can easily verify when we observe modifications in our state of mind: a relaxed mind slows down the breathing speed, and on the opposite side, when we want to "pump ourselves up" into action we increase the speed of the breathing cycle. These very simple actions have an immediate effect of the mental changes and are also observed as manifesting as an effect of mental changes. Therefore it is said that breathing is the bridge that connects the territory of our voluntary actions to the immensely greater territory of our involuntary actions, that includes not only the level of relaxation but also the functions of the organs that are normally controlled by the involuntary muscle system, such as heart, stomach etc.

A normal, or natural, breathing pattern is 360 breathing cycles in 24 minutes. The correct practice of *pranayama* is intended to eventually slow down and stop the breathing pattern, so that the mind becomes more peaceful and controlled, and we are able to focus permanently (*samadhi*) on the object of our meditation.

In the 1970s and 1980s, western countries saw a rapidly increasing interest in pranotherapy, the particular healing technique that uses the magnetic energy of the healer's body to improve the circulation of the life energy in the body of the patient.

Such development hit the roof - so to speak - with the widespread success of Reiki as codified by Mikao Usui into a pseudo-religious system, that includes initiations at three levels, a master-disciple relationship, and even certificates from an institution that blends spiritual, religious, ethical, psychological, emotional and (apparently) scientific aspects.

However, we need to go back to the source and verify the solid facts established by the great *acharyas* of the ancient *yoga* tradition. After completing this important preliminary requirement, we will become able to utilize such knowledge in its pure form, or to present it in a particular language and context that is more suitable for the present circumstances and persons.

Within the human body, *prana* manifests in five main forms: *prana* proper, *apana*, *vyana*, *samana* and *udana*.

- *Prana* is the main life energy and goes outwards - is carried by the breathing during exhalation. It starts in the *ajna chakra* (between the eyebrows) and circulates in the head to regulate the functions of the mind

- *Apana* goes downwards for digestion and evacuation (and childbirth as well), starting from the *manipuraka chakra* and pushing down towards the *muladhara chakra*; it is also carried by the inhaled breath

- *Vyana* makes the body move around, shrink and expand; it acts on the entire muscular system and especially in the energy tension area of the shoulders, neck and back.

- *Samana* keeps the balance among all the other life airs; starting from the *manipuraka chakra* it helps the distribution of energy to the entire body, and is particularly observed in burping.

- *Udana* goes upwards, and from the *manipuraka* it energizes the "fire of digestion" in the stomach, just like the bellows of a blacksmith blow on the furnace.

There are also minor *pranas*:

- *Naga* facilitates the opening of the eyes, mouth, etc, it raises the hair and carries emotions and artistic inspiration,

- *Krikara* controls cough and sneezing, thus keeping the breathing apparatus clean and functional; it also expels toxins through the tongue (in the form of the whitish paste that is called tongue coating),

- *Kurma* controls the contraction movements,

- *Devadatta* controls the movements of the mouth, especially in yawning,

- *Dhananjaya* supports the entire body and increases the appetite and enthusiasm for doing things.

This magnetic energy produced by the living soul travels within the body through a network of *nadis* - the subtle equivalent of the nerves of the nervous system.

The main 10 *nadis* are:

- *Ida* and *Pingala*, rising from the big toes, then rising up to the head, through the nostrils and down to the *muladhara*,

- *Sushumna*, the main straight channel that goes from the *muladhara* (lowest of the *chakras*) up to the *sahasrara* (the highest),

- Gandhari, starting from the *manipuraka* and energizing the throat and the tongue for the higher functions of sound production,
- Atti and Sikhu, starting from the *muladhara chakra* and energizing the ears and the perception of sound ,
- Alampurusha and Alampada, starting from the *muladhara chakra* and energizing the eyes, as they can also emit and absorb subtle energy,
- Sangini and Guhu, connecting the *manipuraka* with the base *chakra (muladhara)*, energizing the perception of pleasure and the functions of the sexual organs.

VERSE 28

द्रव्ययज्ञास्तपोयज्ञा योगयज्ञास्तथापरे ।

dravyayajñāstapoyajñā yogayajñāstathāpare ।

स्वाध्यायज्ञानयज्ञाश्च यतयः संशितव्रताः ॥ ४-२८ ॥

svādhyāyajñānayajñāśca yatayaḥ saṁśitavratāḥ ॥ 4-28 ॥

dravya: objects/ materials; *yajnah*: sacrifice; *tapah*: austerity; *yajnah*: sacrifice; *yoga*: *yoga*; *yajnah*: sacrifice; *tatha*: similarly; *apare*: others; *svadhyaya*: study of the scriptures; *jnana*: of knowledge; *yajnah*: sacrifice; *ca*: and; *yatayah*: ascetics; *samsita*: serious/ sharp; *vratah*: vows.

"Others sacrifice their wealth, or perform austerities as a sacrifice, or engage in *yoga* as an act of sacrifice, or perform sacrifice by the study of the scriptures and the cultivation of knowledge, or by engaging in strict vows."

The concept of *yajna* is expanded here, creating a wider understanding of what brings sacredness in the life of a human being.

The sacrifice of *dravya* or objects or materials is performed not only in the form of the *homa*, where valuable substances such as clarified butter and grains are offered into the fire as auspicious presentations for the Devas. It can be performed also in the form of charity, by which one donates cash or kind to the development and maintenance of institutions such as *dharma sala* (free housing for pilgrims and *sadhus*), *anna kshetra* (free food distribution), *atithi sala* (free temporary housing for travelers and foreigners), *anathalaya* (free accommodation and maintenance for orphaned children, widows and other people who have no protectors), *vidya pitha* (free educational institutions, such as universities, training centers etc).

The greatest charity, however, consists in donating materials and wealth for the mission of spreading transcendental knowledge and consciousness, therefore all *shastras* recommend giving donations to qualified *brahmanas* who are engaged in this crucial work.

The sacrifice of austerity, or *tapo yajna*, includes the performance of *vratas* that help to purify the consciousness and concentrate it on transcendence. The practice of *vrata* involves controlling the mind and senses through several techniques and regulations.

The most famous traditional *vratas* are the *chaturmasya* and the *chandrayana*, generally observed by *sannyasis* (*yatayah*) but there is ample choice to suit everyone's needs and possibilities that are also suitable for ordinary people. The famous Ekadasi vrata, for example, is very simple and followed easily; it is performed as a form of sacrifice and worship to Vishnu also by householders, including women.

An equivalent *vrata*, the Pradosha puja, is found among the devotees of Shiva, and among the devotees of the Mother Goddess the most popular *vrata* is Navaratri. The devotees of Vishnu/Krishna and Shiva also observe annual *vratas* such as Janmashtami, Ram Navami, Shiva ratri, etc. Various scriptures also describe specific observances such as the Katyayani vrata, the Pumsavana vrata, the Payo vrata, etc.

The sacrifice of meditation, or *yoga yajna*, also offers a wide range of practices to suit every mentality - *buddhi, kriya, bhakti, karma, jnana* etc. However, we need to make sure that such *yoga* practices are genuine and not simply cheap inventions of some unqualified person, or that they are not distorted by the influence of ignorance and materialism.

This verse also highlights the sacred nature of the act of *svadhyaya*, or studying the scriptures with a sincere attitude of research; this sacrifice is called *jnana yajna*.

VERSE 29

अपाने जुह्वति प्राणं प्राणेऽपानं तथापरे ।

apāne juhvati prāṇam prāṇe'pānam tathāpare ।

प्राणापानगती रुद्ध्वा प्राणायामपरायणाः ॥ ४-२९ ॥

prāṇāpānagatī ruddhvā prāṇāyāmaparāyaṇāḥ ।। 4-29 ।।

apane: in the *apana*; *juhvati*: offers; *pranam*: the *prana*; *prane*: in the *prana*; *apanam*: the *apana*; *tatha*: similarly; *apare*: others; *prana-apana*: of *prana* and *apana*; *gati*: the movement; *ruddhva*:

checking; *pranayama*: the control of the *prana*; *parayanah*: those who are dedicated to.

"Others sacrifice the *apana* in the *prana*, and the *prana* in the *apana*, controlling both *prana* and *apana*: this method is called *pranayama*."

Verse 27 already mentioned the offering of the activities of the *prana* in the human body; this verse further elaborates on the purpose of the practice of *pranayama*, or "control of the *prana*".

Nowadays, many people have heard about *pranayama*, but the general misinformed public, and sometimes even misinformed *yoga* teachers, present *pranayama* merely as a general hygienic practice to "oxygenate the brain" (therefore improving one's mental power) and to "increase the metabolism" (therefore burning off the excess body fat).

Of course an increased intake of oxygen by deepening one's breathing cycle will have both these effects, but the purpose of *pranayama* is much beyond this. In fact, as we have already mentioned, the ultimate purpose is exactly the opposite of what many people believe. The practice explained in this verse is meant to neutralize the double currents of *prana* in the body. Just like electricity, *prana* runs in a circuit, and its movements stimulate the movements of the consciousness. This verse does not recommend blocking the flow of *prana* (as it happens sometimes in the event of trauma), but explains the gradual pacification of its movements, that create a perfect balance in consciousness.

Such practice consists in offering the exhaled breath (*prana*) into inhaled breath (*apana*), which is called *rechaka* (emptying out). It consists in stopping the breath while keeping the lungs empty. The natural and balancing counterpart action consists in offering the inhaled breath (*apana*) into the exhaled breath (*prana*), which is

called *puraka* (filling in). It consists in stopping the breath while keeping the lungs full.

The perfect stillness of breath - and the life energy that travels with it - is called *kumbhaka*, and brings about the perfect concentration and stillness of consciousness, the result sought by the mystic yogis. In fact, we see from various examples in the *Puranas* and *Itihasas* and *Upanishads*, that often mystic *yogis* go to meditate under water, where obviously one is not supposed to breathe so much. This *pranayama* practice is meant to reduce (not to increase) metabolism and therefore to reduce the need of eating. Eating requires a lot of energy and time because one has to earn one's food, collect it, prepare and cook it, eat and digest it, and clean up the mess, too. For a person who does not need to eat, meditation can continue practically undisturbed and uninterrupted day and night.

We can see for example in the stories of Dhruva, Hiranyakasipu and other persons who engaged in deep meditation, and by the practice of *pranayama* they quickly gave up eating and ultimately even breathing, because they had become able to use the subtlest pranic energy to keep their bodies alive.

VERSE 30

अपरे नियताहाराः प्राणान्प्राणेषु जुह्वति ।

apare niyatahārah prāṇānprāṇeṣu juhvati ।

सर्वेऽप्येते यज्ञविदो यज्ञक्षपितकल्मषाः ॥ ४-३० ॥

sarve'pyete yajñavidō yajñakṣapitakalmaṣāḥ ॥ 4-30 ॥

apare: others; *niyata*: controlled; *aharah*: intake of food; *pranan*: the *prana*; *praneshu*: in the *pranas*; *juhvati*: offers; *sarve*: all; *api*:

although; *ete*: these; *yajnah*: the sacrifice; *vidah*: who know; *yajna-kshapita*: the purification due to the sacrifice; *kalmashah*: the negative reactions.

"Others sacrifice the *prana* into the *pranas* by fasting/suspending breath. However, all these are known as acts of sacrifice, that cleanse (the person from) the negative reactions (of actions)/ one who knows about these sacrifices, purifies his negative reactions through the power of the sacrifice (itself)."

The word *aharah*, meaning "intake", applies both to the intake of food and the intake of air while breathing. The correct practice of *yoga* and *pranayama* enables the *sadhaka* to live normally without eating any food and ultimately without breathing in any air. For many people this idea can be incredible, but it is definitely very possible, and it has also been demonstrated by several researches. There are well-documented cases in which a *sadhaka* has continued to abstain from food and beverages for long periods of time, even for years.

Regarding the cessation of breathing, a *yogi* that has acquired the complete control over his body and vital energy is able to remain under water or buried under soil for many hours. The process is similar to the hibernation of some animals, such as the bears etc, which remain sleeping during several months in the winter season, slowing their breathing and heart rate, and totally abstaining from all foods. However, this extraordinary ability is controlled by the *yogi* while retaining full consciousness, and not by sliding into an unconscious slumber like the hibernating animals.

The sacrifice of *prana* through the *pranayama* is described in this verse as the cessation of the cycle of breathing, when both brain hemispheres are perfectly balanced and the energy remains in a quiescent state, like a flame without wind. As we have already mentioned, this gradual process also slows down the body

metabolism, so that the *yogi* needs less and less food, and then less and less air to breathe.

Of course, one can also utilize *pranayama* in the reverse form, to increase the intake of oxygen through deeper breathing and revitalize the brain and metabolism, to lose weight and increase the appetite and the ability to enjoy sense gratification - but this is not the purpose of *yoga*. It is the purpose of cheaters who bank on the materialistic tendencies of materialistic people who aspire to increase their opportunities for sense gratification.

All the *yoga* practices are sacred acts meant to purify our consciousness by raising it from the material level to the transcendental level.

This is the only way we can become free from the negative reactions of our wrong choices. If we perform these practices for another purpose, we will not achieve the same result.

Another important meaning contained in this verse refers to the regulation of the diet (*niyata aharah*). A strictly vegetarian and sattvic diet is required for the practice of *yoga*, because only a pure vegetarian sattvic diet fulfills the requirements of *yama* and *niyama*, the fundamental first "limbs" of *yoga* practice.

By consuming moderate amounts of sattvic foods such as water, fruits, grains, milk products, leaves, flowers and roots, one's body and mind become purified, energized and fit for the practice of *sadhana* and pursuit of knowledge.

Chandogya Upanishad (7.26.2) states: *ahara suddhau sattva suddhih, sattva suddhau dhruva smritih, smriti lambhe sarva grantihinam vipramokshah*, "By eating pure food, the mind becomes pure. When the mind is pure, one develops a good memory. When the memory is strong, all the knots of the heart become dissolved."

Later on (*Gita* 6.17), Krishna will repeat that one must carefully regulate the intake of food and the sleep habits, and almost at the end of the text (*Gita* 17.7-10) he will explain which foods are increasing the power of *sattva*, *rajas* or *tamas* on the body and mind of a person who is consuming them.

Sattvic foods are not only fresh and healthy, but also juicy, fatty, nutritious and palatable, therefore since the purpose of *yoga* consists in reducing the metabolism and therefore the need for food, we must understand that such sattvic foods are to be consumed in very small quantities.

When a person is able to control his mind and senses, and to regulate the diet, even a very small amount of good food will be sufficient to give full satisfaction for the body and the mind.

VERSE 31

यज्ञशिष्टामृतभुजो यान्ति ब्रह्म सनातनम् ।

yajñaśiṣṭāmṛtabhujo yānti brahma sanātanam ।

नायं लोकोऽस्त्ययज्ञस्य कुतोऽन्यः कुरुसत्तम ॥ ४-३१ ॥

nāyaṁ loko'styayajñasya kuto'nyaḥ kurusattama ॥ 4-31 ॥

yajna: of the sacrifice; *sishta*: leftovers; *amrita*: the nectar; *bhujah*: who have eaten/ tasted; *yanti*: they go; *brahma-sanatanam*: the eternal Brahman; *na*: not; *ayam*: this; *loka*: planet; *asti*: there is; *a-yajnasya*: one who does not perform sacrifice; *kutah*: where is; *anyah*: other; *kuru-sattama*: o best among the Kurus.

"O best of the Kurus (Arjuna), those who accept the nectar of the leftovers from the sacrifice attain the eternal Transcendence. Those who do not perform sacrifice cannot (have even) (the benefits that we can find in) this world, what to speak of (attaining) another (world)/anything else."

Another translation of the second part of the verse is, "the world ceases to exist for one who does not perform sacrifices, what to speak of the other world".

Another meaning still is, "those who do not perform sacrifices are not allowed to remain in this world (as human beings), what to speak of attaining the other world (of the Devas)".

This verse states that the purpose of human life is to qualify oneself through the proper performance of sacred actions (*yajnas*) according to time, place and circumstances, in order to elevate and purify one's consciousness and attain the transcendental level.

By this process we subordinate all other considerations to the primary purpose of *yajna*, just like a mother cooks and serves the meals for her small children thinking about the happiness and nourishment of her dear ones, and consumes her own meal after the child has finished eating. A mother does not feel diminished in eating whatever is left after feeding her small children, because feeding the child constitutes a greater happiness than having the first choice of foods.

Vedic tradition teaches that one should not eat leftovers - the food that has already been tasted by other people - because leftovers are one of the most effective vehicles for contamination and disease, as everybody's mouth is full of germs. It is also said that together with the germs (that belong to a gross level, although they may be microscopically small), leftover food and similar articles carry the subtle imprint of the person who has touched them first.

This is the reason why it is not healthy to use second-hand clothes or shoes. However, when the leftovers come from a divine manifestation, they become "infected" with the divine qualities and thus the person who receives them acquires these same qualities. This is the principle of the *prasadam*, the sacred food that has been sanctified by being offered to the Deity, and it also applies to all "leftovers" that remain after the performance of a sacred action.

Thus we can interpret the *yajna sistha amrita* in a very practical way, as the food and beverages that have been offered to the Deity first, and thus have been surcharged with spiritual energy. Such food nourishes the soul and the mind as well as the body, and constitutes one of the greatest factors that support us in our *sadhana*. Everybody needs to eat, especially at the beginning stages of the practice of *yoga*, and if we do not eat the right things we will have to suffer.

The practice of fasting is only one side of the equation and would not be very useful if it was not accompanied by the consumption of sanctified foods.

Excessive fasting is detrimental to health, just as excessive eating: we therefore need to regulate our habits. The definition can also be expanded to indicate the sense pleasure and other side benefits that come spontaneously from the proper performance of our duties as sacred actions.

On the other side, those who focus on their personal interest remain unable to really relax and ironically are unable to actually enjoy the good things of life.

All their pleasures are spoiled by anxiety, greed, lust, anger and fear, and they slide into the lower regions of consciousness, thus losing the valuable opportunity of the human birth.

VERSE 32

एवं बहुविधा यज्ञा वितता ब्रह्मणो मुखे ।

evam̐ bahuvidhā yajñā vitatā brahmaṇo mukhe ।

कर्मजान्निवद्धि तान्सर्वानिवं ज्ञात्वा विमोक्ष्यसे ॥ ४-३२ ॥

karmajānviddhi tānsarvānevam̐ jñātvā vimokṣyase ॥ 4-32 ॥

evam: thus; *bahu:* many; *vidha:* types of; *yajna:* sacrifice; *vitata:* branched out/ were elaborated; *brahmanah:* of the Brahman/ *Vedas;* *mukhe:* from the mouth; *karma-jan:* born out of work/ activities; *viddhi:* you should know; *tan:* them; *sarvan:* all; *evam:* thus; *jnatva:* knowing; *vimokshyase:* you will become free.

"Thus there is a great variety of sacrifices found everywhere/ at every level and aimed at Brahman/ emanating from the mouth of Brahman (God). Knowing that all these are born from activity/ are genuine forms of dutiful action, you will be liberated."

Here Krishna observes that the genuine system offers a great variety of proper engagement for everyone, so that each individual can remain happily connected with Transcendence and progress in his/her own evolution, by properly utilizing the natural tendencies and abilities that he has, and enjoying the leftovers (*yajna sista*) that are most suitable to his taste and requirements.

Such sacrifices are accomplished through the actions of body, senses and mind, and they also include the performance of one's occupational work, provided this work is supported by the transcendental consciousness, that is offering the results from one's work for the cause of Brahman.

The sacred action or *yajna* is not limited by material circumstances, and it does not have to be exactly the same for everybody. Imposition of a particular religious practice on others is always wrong, even if we believe that such religious practice is the highest and most effective. Without freedom, there can be no real progress. But what is freedom? Only a person that has the proper knowledge can really be considered free, because ignorance binds us to wrong uninformed choices and non-progressive situations.

First and foremost, we need the knowledge that sacrifice/ sacred action is based on the various activities we perform in the course of our life - every action can be a *yajna*, provided the proper knowledge is present.

Each individual must be carefully guided on the path of personal development by a qualified spiritual master, who takes full responsibility for the student's success. Of course, the particular spiritual practice one chooses to perform must be genuine, i.e. must come "from the mouth of Brahman", or - for our practical purposes - from the mouth of a qualified *brahmana*, who knows Brahman and can help other attain the same level.

The word *vatata*, "branched out", further clarifies that such different varieties of transcendental engagement should be based on the same fundamental principles of *dharma* and the same genuine knowledge. A sincere seeker should carefully study all such different applications of the concept of *yajna*, in order to acquire a greater picture, and better understand transcendence.

Another important point is that, just like in all other cases, we must avoid false cultural superimpositions that have been created by popular beliefs.

In the non-abrahamic ideology, sacrifice is about joy and glory, and improving life.

On the other hand, in abrahamic ideologies the idea of sacrifice is about suffering, generally killing or renouncing life. It originated from the animal sacrifices required to worship evil spirits and from the habit of eating meat, particularly popular among the populations living in deserts. In the course of time, with the development of Christianity, animal sacrifice was substituted by the "sacrifice" of a Jesus who - as the "sacrificial lamb" - was nailed to the cross for the pleasure of God the Father. Thus the consumption of meat was separated from the concept of the sacredness of life of animals (that had to be offered to God first before people could eat their meat) and therefore it became a trivial consideration. So instead of relieving the sufferings and saving the lives of innocent animals, Christianity taught that the life and sufferings of animals had no value or importance (as animals "had no soul") and could be indifferently be used for the pleasure of men. This mentality is the basis for the horrible slaughterhouses, the factory farms, the pleasure hunting, and so many other uncivilized practices that spread with abrahmism.

Since abrahmism also considers women as inferior beings (somewhere between animals and men) little more than mere bodies, in cultures dominated by the abrahamic mentality the only value for women is when they dedicate themselves fully to the service and pleasure of husband and children, not out of love and free choice, but out of duty and passiveness. Women who do not submit easily are persecuted as "bad women" and called selfish, rebellious, disobeying, disrespectful, arrogant, proud etc. Submission is often enforced by denying education and other facilities to girl children, so that in the future they will not have any opportunity for independent employment, financial independence or power, or any other type of freedom or power, including the opportunity to progress in the science of spirituality and religion.

When this idea is applied to the concept of sacrifice as suffering and death, the result is fatal. Not long ago, the Catholic church canonized ("declared saint") one woman because she refused to allow her pregnancy to be interrupted although she had been clearly told by doctors that she had no chance to survive childbirth and even the child would not have been able to live long after birth.

VERSE 33

श्रेयान्द्रव्यमयाद्यज्ञाज्ज्ञानयज्ञः परन्तप ।

śreyāndravyamayādyajñājñānayaajñāḥ parantapa ।

सर्वं कर्माखिलं पार्थ ज्ञाने परिसमाप्यते ॥ ४-३३ ॥

sarvaṁ karmākhilam pārtha jñāne parisamāpyate ॥ 4-33 ॥

sreyan: better; *dravya:* possessions; *mayat:* made of; *yajnat:* than the sacrifice; *jnana-yajnah:* (is) the sacrifice of knowledge; *parantapa:* o destroyer of the enemy (Arjuna); *sarvam:* all; *karma-akhilam:* the totality of actions; *partha:* o son of Pritha (Arjuna); *jnane:* in knowledge; *parisamapyate:* end.

"O Parantapa (Arjuna), better than the sacrifice of one's wealth is the sacrifice of knowledge. O Partha (Arjuna), the entire scope of all the activities (must) culminate in knowledge."

It is important to understand that the "sacrifice of knowledge" mentioned in this verse does not mean giving up knowledge to accept blind faith, as some groups of people may believe. Rather, it refers to the search and application of knowledge as a sacred action. Without knowledge, the sacrifice of material possessions remains on the material platform and cannot give a transcendental

benefit. However, it is true that not everybody has sufficient intelligence to engage in the acquisition of knowledge, so the sacrifice of materials ultimately leads to the sacrifice of knowledge, due to the gradual purification from selfishness.

The word *sreyan* ("better") is particularly interesting, because it suggests that the acquisition of knowledge brings more permanent results than the mere sacrifice of objects. Even after attaining the heavenly planets by the power of one's charity or ritualistic ceremonies, one will ultimately fall from heaven and have to return to a life of hard work on this planet. Also, the sacrifice of materials requires the acquisition of wealth and goods, which might be difficult in some circumstances.

On the other hand, one does not need to be rich or materially powerful in order to dedicate himself to the sincere search for knowledge.

However, these considerations are relative, because the rituals and sacrifices prescribed in the *karma kanda* are not necessarily performed out of selfish and materialist considerations (i.e. to get some material benefit). In fact the purpose and proper application of the *karma kanda* sacrifices consist in gradually purifying and elevating one's consciousness to the divine level, and becoming free from all material identifications and attachments. Such gradual purification and spiritual progress lead to liberation from material conditionings and towards the natural relationship of service and devotion to the Supreme.

Although this verse appears to give preference to the *jnana kanda* over the *karma kanda*, we should not forget that the system of ritualistic ceremonies was created with the purpose of engaging people in a practical active meditation on the Divine. Mere theoretical knowledge or dry scholarship is not sufficient to qualify as "*jnana yajna*".

Therefore we must understand that the proper application of knowledge gives the required transcendental value to all activities. It is through the proper application of knowledge that we can understand how to properly direct the sacrifice of materials, by offering them in the sacred fire or by using them in various other ways for the Divine service. In this way, we should understand that there is no contradiction, opposition or competition between *jnana kanda* and *karma kanda* - actually either one without the other is useless, as they are meant to complete each other.

The sacrifice at the level of consciousness or knowledge is superior to the mere sacrifice of ingredients in ritual worship, because gross matter is generated at the subtle level first; this introduces the concept of *manasa puja*, or "worship in meditation", that is considered equally valuable as physical worship when it is done with the proper attention and consciousness.

VERSE 34

तद्विद्धि प्रणिपातेन परिप्रश्नेन सेवया ।

tadviddhi praṇipātena paripraśnena sevayā ।

उपदेक्ष्यन्ति ते ज्ञानं ज्ञानिनस्तत्त्वदर्शिनः ॥ ४-३४ ॥

upadekṣyanti te jñānaṁ jñāninastattvadarśinaḥ ।। 4-34 ।।

tat: that; *viddhi*: you should learn; *pranipatena*: by prostrating; *pariprasenena*: by questioning thoroughly; *sevaya*: by serving; *upadekshyanti*: they will initiate; *te*: you; *jnanam*: knowledge; *jnaninah*: the *jnanis* (those who have the knowledge); *tattva*: the truth; *darsinah*: who see.

"You should learn this (knowledge) by approaching those who directly contemplate the Truth, asking them many questions and offering them service. Those who have the knowledge will initiate you (into this science)."

This verse is one of the most important of the entire *Bhagavad gita*, and is often quoted to substantiate the need to surrender to, and take formal initiation from a spiritual master.

The importance of accepting a Guru needs to be stressed because it is a natural tendency for many people to pick just what they find convenient and use it to manufacture some new process. The independent study of books of knowledge is always possible, but we must be very careful against the misunderstandings that are created by cultural superimpositions, attachments, personal beliefs and prejudice, both ours and received second-hand from someone else. Many people read books superficially, without making a real effort to understand or verify their understanding, and sometimes they are motivated by the desire of being part of a trend or fashion, or to showcase their erudition.

However, it is also very dangerous to delegate one's spiritual life to an institutional Guru that does not really care to help his disciples attain the perfect level of Self realization, or even worse, that has no idea of how to do that, because he himself has not attained that level. The world is full of cheaters that distort the meaning of the sacred relationship between teacher and student, to cheaply acquire unquestioning followers. Someone else's misconceptions are no better than the misconceptions that one can make up for himself.

So it is better to trust someone who is really expert, and we have the right and duty to make sure that our guide is really expert. *Gita* does not say that disciples should not ask questions. Quite the contrary.

The word *pariprasnena*, “questioning thoroughly” refers to the development of a solid and deep personal relationship with the spiritual teacher, who needs to understand exactly the mind of the student in order to adjust the teaching plan.

A Guru that has thousands or even hundreds of thousands of disciples will be unable to even remember their names, or the general and publicly known information about such disciples - what to speak of their difficulties, shortcomings and problems, that tend to be kept hidden because of ego considerations.

Such "mass of disciples" never or almost never has the opportunity to ask relevant questions from the Guru, because usually the personal presence of the Guru is monopolized by a small group of "intimate followers", that ultimately may even prevent him from getting in touch with other people, and who inspect and control all the correspondence and other contacts that the Guru may have with others.

But this is not what *Gita* recommends.

A true Guru should not take too many disciples, because he realizes that accepting a disciple entails a huge responsibility - the obligation to bring the student to Self realization, some way or another, in this life or in another.

This Herculean task cannot be performed without a constant and exhaustive questioning process. If a Guru does not follow or allow this genuine process as prescribed in *Gita*, he is a faker and a cheater, and he should be immediately abandoned.

The questions and answers also go both ways, in the sense that the teacher is also supposed to question the student in order to understand his actual position and realizations. However, the questioning by the student is even more important. When the teacher asks questions to the student, the evaluation of the

student's understanding and knowledge can be vitiated by a superficial and mechanical memorization of the answers, but when the student is the one who asks questions the process of learning and understanding becomes easier and more personal.

Another very important word in the verse is *pranipatena*, "approaching submissively", or by "prolonged salutations" or *pranama*. This is followed by *sevaya*, "offering service", or taking orders from the teacher and reciprocating with gratitude and appreciation for the extremely important work that the teacher is doing for our benefit. It is true that knowledge should always be offered freely (there should never be a price on the transmission of knowledge), but it is also true that the student should be adequately grateful and develop a favorable personal relationship with the teacher.

This means we should accept a Guru in full humility and serve the Guru without remaining attached to our prestige, as a menial humble servant, not just inquiring out of mere curiosity or in a challenging spirit. Thus both blind following and absurd inquires are obstacles on the path of the correct acquisition of knowledge.

The submission and humility that the student needs to offer the teacher is not intended to please the ego of the teacher. A genuine teacher is very kind by nature and is free from *ahankara* and *mamatva*, as he is situated on the purely transcendental level of Self realization. He does not want to be worshiped or to have power on other people, because he considers himself as a mere servant of God. The only reason why the student should be humble and submissive is that without such humility, it will be very difficult to actually listen and understand the teachings. If such submission is misused, and the Guru does not deliver on his responsibilities, the disciple has the right and the duty to leave him and seek better guidance.

Thus, just like the disciple needs to pass the test of the *guru*, the *guru* needs to pass the test of the disciple. There is nothing wrong or offensive about that. Also, it is perfectly possible that a student might outgrow the teacher, and find that there is more to learn and realize than the old teacher can give him. In such case, the student has the right and duty to take leave from the first *guru* and seek a new one. In fact, this verse clearly indicates that one should not just stick to one teacher, but that one should approach "the *jnanis* who see the *tattva*" and receive initiation "from them".

A false unqualified Guru is always afraid that inquisitive students may find out about his shortcomings and seek other teachers, so he emotionally manipulates and blackmails their disciples into an "exclusive loyalty" that is compared to the faithfulness of a wife towards a husband, and he claims that a student must have one Guru only, with one initiation only. This is another misconception that needs to be demolished.

In Vedic times, children were sent to the *gurukula*, where they studied under the personal, expert and loving care of the teacher, who knew how to recognize the natural talents and develop the true potential of each individual. After a number of years spent in preliminary studies, the disciple would be officially initiated by the *guru*, and such *diksha* was the public recognition of the actual *guna* and *karma* of the student.

After being initiated to the Gayatri mantra and other *mantras*, to the performance of rituals and to the secret knowledge, the disciples remained with the *guru* for a few more years to complete their studies, and then returned home after offering a gift in gratefulness to the teacher (*guru dakshina*). Back home, they would marry and start working at their occupational duties, becoming teachers in turn (if recognized as *brahmanas*) or administrators (*kshatriyas*) or entrepreneurs (*vaisyas*).

Occasionally, a few students (*naistika brahmacharis*) chose to remain with the *guru* instead of getting married and working on their own, and kept assisting the teacher without limitations of time. Other students, that were particularly gifted and were still thirsty for knowledge after completing their normal studies, took leave from the *guru* and went seeking for other teachers, and were again initiated, into higher or different branches of science. Nobody considered this as a betrayal (as if a wife had left her husband seeking for a better man), rather the first teacher was happy and blessed the student to achieve the perfection he sought. We need to return to this sane and healthy vision of things.

Now, some people will object, saying that "the Sat Guru remains our lord and master lifetime after lifetime". This is true. There are several levels of *gurus*, and the Sat Guru, the "eternal Guru", is the most important because he gives us the transcendental knowledge that will lead us to liberation. But this has nothing to do with the official function of formal initiation, and even more important, one does not need to get a different "eternal Guru" in each lifetime. After we have met our Sat Guru, and after our eyes have been opened to the wonderful truth of spiritual nature, we can and should continue to learn from every qualified person we meet, recognizing that the Guru is one - always residing in our heart - even when speaking through the mouths of different people.

Another extremely important expression in this verse is *tattva darsinah*, "those who directly contemplate the *tattva*". One cannot be *guru* by proxy, by political vote, by power of attorney or by right of inheritance. One who does not have the direct vision of the *tattva* is simply not qualified to teach; it is better to associate with the books written by the great previous *acharyas* than to waste time with people who do not have true realizations - starting from the basic realization of Brahman: we are not this material body.

VERSE 35

यज्ज्ञात्वा न पुनर्मोहमेवं यास्यसि पाण्डव ।

yajjñātvaṁ na punarmohamevaṁ yāsyasi pāṇḍava ।

येन भूतान्यशेषाणि द्रक्ष्यस्यात्मन्यथो मयि ॥ ४-३५ ॥

yena bhūtānyaśeṣāṇi drakṣyasiātmanyatho mayi ॥ 4-35 ॥

yat: this (knowledge); *jnatva*: knowing; *na*: not; *punah*: again; *moham*: illusion; *evam*: like this; *yasyasi*: you shall come; *pandava*: o son of Pandu (Arjuna); *yena*: by that; *bhutani*: living entities/ states of being; *aseshani*: endless/ without exception; *drakshyasi*: you will see; *atmani*: in the Self; *atha u*: that is to say; *mayi*: in me.

"O Pandava (Arjuna), knowing this (science) you will never again fall into illusion, and you will directly see all the innumerable living entities/ states of being in the self, therefore in me."

Krishna continues to give us important clues on the proper acquisition of transcendental knowledge. Such knowledge (*yat*, that is equivalent to the *tat* of the previous verse) dispels all illusions and enables one to see all living entities and states of being within the Self. This is not just theory, it must be experienced in practice.

If this is the result of acquiring the transcendental knowledge, then it is logical and natural to expect that a *guru* offering to initiate a disciple into this knowledge must exhibit the very same symptoms in a permanent and constant way. A real *guru* is never under the illusion of being the material body or seeing others as material bodies; he has no *ahankara* or *mamatva*, but is free from all *upadhis* or separatist/ sectarian definitions.

The expression *drakhyasi atmani atha mayi* refers to the direct perception of the spiritual/ transcendental nature of each living entity, as part and parcel of God. When we are firmly established in this knowledge and realization, we are able to see the unity of all life and appreciate each small part of it in its unlimited spiritual glory. It is a real experience that radically changes our views on things.

The expression *atmani atha u mayi*, "in the Atman/ Self, that is in me", is very interesting. It proclaims the identical nature of the *atman*, or individual Self, with the *brahman*, or Supreme Self. Abrahamic faiths teach that the individual is just a sinner, a puny and powerless creature, contended between a "good God" and a "bad god" (i.e. Satan), and that can only be "saved" through unquestioning allegiance to the representatives of the "good God". This is totally alien from the Vedic concept and from the *Gita*.

This "sameness" of the individual Self with the supreme Self must be understood properly, because a person who is still under the delusion of material identification can easily get trapped in a megalomaniac belief that pushes him to believe that he is indeed the one and only Supreme Personality of Godhead, and as such he is entitled to the worship and obedience of everybody else, to the enjoyment of everything that exists, and to the destruction of anything and anybody else who may be perceived as threats to such position. That would be a tragic mistake.

This verse states that the *atman*, the individual Self, contains all the states of being because the individual Self is part of the supreme Self, the Brahman, that is the father of all beings and the origin of all the states of existence. The *atman* is reality just like the *brahman* is reality. Reality contains all the states of existence and comprises all living entities, and therefore the consciousness of the *atman* includes all the states of consciousness of all living beings.

Each one of these different states of consciousness becomes manifested when the *atman* develops the corresponding body.

Moreover, the recent studies in particle physics show that all the particles that compose the universe are connected on a subtle level. All *jivas* are connected through the *param atman*, the supreme Self that is the underlying Reality that makes individual existences real. The feeling of separatism is just illusion.

VERSE 36

अपि चेदसि पापेभ्यः सर्वेभ्यः पापकृत्तमः ।

api cedasi pāpebhyaḥ sarvebhyaḥ pāpakṛttamaḥ ।

सर्वं ज्ञानप्लवेनैव वृजिनं सन्तरिष्यसि ॥ ४-३६ ॥

sarvaṁ jñānaplavenaiva vṛjinam santariṣyasi ॥ 4-36 ॥

api: although; *cet*: if; *asi*: you are; *papebhyah*: of sinners; *sarvebhyah*: of all; *papa-krit-tamah*: the greatest sinner; *sarvam*: all (such sins); *jnana-plavena*: by the boat of knowledge; *eva*: certainly; *vrijinam*: (the ocean of) wickedness; *santarishyasi*: will cross over.

"Even if you were burdened by many negative actions, by the greatest possible sins, you will be able to cross the ocean of bad things by the boat of knowledge."

No matter how many mistakes we may have committed, the true acquisition of the correct knowledge and realization purifies them all, putting them in the right perspective. This does not mean that a superficial conversion to some kind of sectarian Krishnaism is a free ticket out of jail that erases all the results of the bad choices

we have made, or a free pass to continue to commit bad actions without getting punished. Such a thing is not possible. Even after attaining liberation, we will have to face the consequences of our past bad choices, but we will not be bound by them because we have realized our true nature and transcendental position.

The natural results of a bad choice create circumstances that will push us into committing more bad actions; for example when we tell a lie we create a situation that will force us to tell more and more lies to uphold the first one. Similarly, by indulging in violence and hatred we create results that will come back at us and make us suffer, usually by clashing with other violent and hateful people.

The vicious circle will continue for the conditioned soul because he remains unable to clearly understand why bad things keep happening to him, and he will consider himself a victim of other people or of circumstances. By repeatedly trying to apply forcible material solutions to such problems he becomes more and more entangled and more conditioned, more deluded and more strictly enslaved by lust and anger.

The material world is an ocean of wickedness and suffering. Everybody is food for someone else (*Bhagavata Purana* 1.13.47), and birth, disease, old age and death are present at every step. One's body, senses and mind are difficult masters to please, and naturally cause a host of sufferings through hunger, thirst, lust, fatigue, confusion, etc.

Among human beings, cruelty can become even worse than among animals, and there is no limit to the horrors that people can inflict on one another and even on themselves.

Foolish people try to block out all "upsetting" views and news, deluding themselves into thinking that they can keep evil out of

their tidy and manicured lives by fitting iron bars at the windows or at the door and paying others to remove all suspicious people and causes for trouble from the "perfect neighborhood", but this is impossible, because the wickedness spontaneously grows inside any person that remains ignorant of the transcendental knowledge and realization.

Proper knowledge and realization ends all this wickedness because it shows us the proper path - the ultimate benefit of *sreyah* that is better than the immediate gratification of *preyah*.

Starting to choose transcendental and virtuous solutions modifies our consciousness, purifying it and attuning it to the Divine plan, and thus we come out of the vicious circle, entering a virtuous circle that will take us further into the realization of our true nature - liberation.

The metaphor of the boat of knowledge (*jnana plavena*) is very appropriate because this world is an ocean of problems. We can hope to cross a river or a small lake by swimming, but the ocean is too large: one cannot swim across - we need a boat that will carry us through.

VERSE 37

यथैधांसि समिद्धोऽग्निर्भस्मसात्कुरुतेऽर्जुन ।

yathaidhāṁsi samiddho'gnirbhasmasātkurute'rjuna ।

ज्ञानाग्निः सर्वकर्माणि भस्मसात्कुरुते तथा ॥ ४-३७ ॥

jñānāgniḥ sarvakarmāṇi bhasmasātkurute tathā ॥ 4-37 ॥

yatha: just as; *edhamsi*: pieces of wood/ firewood; *samiddhah*: blazing; *agnih*: the fire; *bhasma-sat*: into ash; *kurute*: makes;

arjuna: o Arjuna; *jnana-agnih*: the fire of knowledge; *sarva-karmani*: all the *karma* (actions and their reactions); *bhasma-sat*: into ashes; *kurute*: makes; *tatha*: similarly.

"O Arjuna, just like the blazing fire turns firewood into ashes, similarly the fire of knowledge turns all *karma* (reactions to action) into ashes."

It is important to understand that it is the fire of knowledge and realization, and not a mere allegiance, that will destroy all the reactions of our bad choices. All the reactions to all actions will be burned to ashes, both good and bad *karma*, but we should worry more about the bad *karma* because its consequences pull us further and further into committing mistakes, while good *karma* gives us more opportunities to liberate ourselves by making more good choices.

Reactions to our choices develop in various stages - as seeds, as plants, and finally as fruits. The fire of knowledge will first destroy the seeds of karmic reactions (i.e. the desires, or forms that have not manifested yet), then it will burn the plant (i.e. the activities and habits, that we keep building day by day) and help us process and burn the fruits of the karmic reactions that have already become manifested (the visible consequences that we have already reaped such as diseases, handicaps, debts, etc).

The blazing fire of knowledge burns the ignorance and therefore the attachment and identification to actions. If these are not burned properly after a reasonable amount of time, we should consider that maybe the knowledge we are following is not correct, or it is not applied in the correct way, or with sufficient dedication and sincerity.

To consume a pile of firewood we need a blazing fire - a small candle will not be enough. Like the powerful heat of the fire, the

transcendental knowledge and consciousness will pervade all our actions and purify them deeply, transforming them in turn into ardent fire, so that the same actions that used to create bondage will now act like fire itself, and consume all material attachments and identifications because they carry the same heat of the original fire.

Only the ash will remain - a pure, clean substance that can be used to purify the body, fertilize the land and even to make soap. Even after a Self-realized *yogi* has left this world, the benefits of his transcendental actions will continue to bless people for a long time.

VERSE 38

न हि ज्ञानेन सदृशं पवित्रमिह विद्यते ।

na hi jñānena sadṛśam pavitramiha vidyate ।

तत्स्वयं योगसंसिद्धः कालेनात्मनि विन्दति ॥ ४-३८ ॥

tatsvayaṁ yogasamsiddhaḥ kālenātmani vindati ॥ 4-38 ॥

na: not; *hi:* certainly; *jnanena:* by knowledge; *sadrisam:* in comparison; *pavitram:* pure/ sanctified; *iha:* here (in this world/ body); *vidyate:* it is known (to exist); *tat:* that; *svayam:* himself; *yoga-samsiddhah:* (established) in the perfection of *yoga*; *kalena:* in the course of time; *atmani:* in the Self; *vindati:* realizes/ attains/ finds pleasure.

"In this world there is nothing as pure/ sacred as knowledge. One who achieves perfection in (this) *yoga* comes to find full happiness in the Self in the course of time."

Again, this verse identifies *yoga* with the transcendental knowledge and realization of Brahman. What is the purpose and

perfection of *yoga*? Finding pleasure within the *atman*, the spiritual Self - certainly not bodily fitness or mind relaxation.

This transcendental science of the Atman/ Brahman is the purest knowledge, the most important knowledge in the world, because without knowing and realizing one's Self, a human being remains constantly dissatisfied, feeling that something vital is missing, and keeps trying to achieve the happiness he needs by running after sense gratification, position, possessions etc.

All the problems in the world are due to the lack of this transcendental knowledge. One who has acquired this knowledge theoretically and practically becomes happy in himself and does not need anything else, therefore he becomes able to deal with the many duties and situations in life with a spirit of detachment and balance that guarantees success.

A Self-realized *yogi*'s inner happiness is undisturbed by external circumstances, because he can never be separated from his inner Self. He does not need to seek material validation or gratification, and he does not need to reassure or protect himself through material arrangements. He peacefully and sincerely performs his due work, out of duty only, with a very straightforward attitude, and in the best possible way because he offers such work as worship to the Supreme.

When material pleasures come, he accepts them as *prasadam* - leftovers from the superior spiritual happiness he feels and generates - and utilizes them to keep his mind and body in good conditions. When material sufferings come, he finds solace in the inner happiness and peace that always remains with him, and he is able to carry on the performance of his duties without becoming depressed. He remains happy and satisfied even at the time of leaving this body, because not even death can confuse the transcendental realization of *atman/brahman*.

The word *kalena*, "in the course of time", warns us that perfection of *yoga* is not a quick fix that we can achieve in a few gym lessons, or even with some spiritual retreat or novitiate in some institution. A minimum of 21 days in full-immersion is required simply to start changing one's bad habits and obtaining a clear perception of what we are supposed to achieve in the end. A minimum of 1 year of scrupulous practice in purification and *sadhana* is required to start feeling a deep change in one's perception of life, and to get the direct experience of spiritual existence. Of course one may get quicker results because of the good work that was done and the results already achieved in previous lifetimes, but for a beginner the first period can be extremely taxing.

The various stories contained in the scriptures clearly show that *yogis* meditate and practice their *sadhanas* for many years, sometimes hundreds of years before attaining full realization. We may not have all that time, therefore we have been offered many facilitations on this path, of which we should take proper advantage.

VERSE 39

श्रद्धावाँल्लभते ज्ञानं तत्परः संयतेन्द्रियः ।

śraddhāvāṅllabhate jñānaṁ tatparaḥ saṁyatendriyaḥ ।

ज्ञानं लब्ध्वा परां शान्तिमचिरेणाधिगच्छति ॥ ४-३९ ॥

jñānaṁ labdhvā parāṁ śāntimacireṇādhigacchati ॥ 4-39 ॥

sraddha-van: one who has faith; *labhate*: obtains; *jnanam*: knowledge; *tat-parah*: dedicated to; *samyata*: controlled; *indriyah*: the senses; *jnanam*: knowledge; *labdhva*: by obtaining; *param*: supreme; *santim*: peace; *acirena*: very soon; *adigacchati*: attains.

"One who has faith and controls his senses by focusing on that purpose (can) achieve knowledge, and one who has attained knowledge very quickly finds peace."

The previous verse promised that happiness comes with the proper realization of the Self (Atman/ Brahman), and this verse further explains that happiness is also accompanied by peace.

The acquisition of transcendental knowledge (*tat viddhi*) needs to start with faith (*sraddha*), because we need a bit of faith if we want to seek for something valuable. Faith is an essential factor of progress in life. Without trusting the teacher's word, we cannot learn anything because we will not be able to accept the basic information on which to build our knowledge. For example, when a pupil starts learning how to write, the teacher asks him to memorize some new strange drawings called letters and tells him that they have such and such sounds, and relate to the names of such and such objects. It is by faith and trust only, that the student can accept this information instead of rejecting it, because the student is not equipped yet to verify whether such information is correct or not. The same applies whenever we want to learn swimming or driving a car, or anything other knowledge.

Faith is also required in many daily situations - when we purchase a ticket for a journey or a show, when we ask directions to find a street, when we get legal advice or any other consultancy, when we take a medicine recommended by a doctor or pharmacist, and so on. Without a bit of faith or trust we would not be able to do much even in our ordinary life. Of course, faith is just the beginning, the first push that sets us in motion - then we need to experiment and verify directly the validity of the things we have put our faith in.

There are two words indicating faith: *sraddha* and *nistha*. *Sraddha* is the initial act of trust that puts us on the path of progress, while *nistha* is the ripe faith that comes from personal experience.

One of the most famous treatises on *Bhakti*, called *Bhakti rasamrita sindhu* (1.4.15-15), gives the technical steps in this sequence: *adau sraddha, tatah sadhu-sango, atha bhajana kriya, tato anartha-nivrittih syat, tato nistha, rucis tatha, atha saktis, tato bhavas, tatah prema abhyudanchati*. In the beginning some faith is required. This faith will bring us in contact with *sadhus* (good people), and by the power of their good example and encouragement we start to directly experiment on the process of *sadhana* (worship and devotional service). By practicing the *sadhana* we become purified from bad habits and bad qualities, from shortcomings and any other unwanted problem. Then we become firmly situated in the process and we actually experience happiness and enjoy the experience immensely. We become attached to the transcendental experience, then we feel a strong emotion and then pure love for God.

Everyone is seeking God, although many people may have different ideas about what or who God might be. We seek a purpose in life, the origin and cause of everything, the subtle connection between us and the world and other people - unconsciously we feel all this is extremely important, and we constantly try to get the answers. This is the purpose of human life. Without such search, the valuable opportunity of human life is simply wasted.

The practice of controlling the senses (and the mind that is sometimes called "the sixth sense") is very important in the process of acquiring knowledge and realization. Faith encourages us to become engaged in the process, and sense control enables us to continue the process without getting distracted again and again.

Another important expression in this verse is *tat-parah*, "being dedicated to". The pursuance of spiritual knowledge and realization is not a hobby, a superficial flimsy interest, or a trendy way to find a place in society through membership of some

exclusive club. It is not something that should come after all other concerns - the house mortgage, the upgrading of our technical gadgets, the renovation of our wardrobe, fun-seeking vacations, pleasing one's family, getting some university degree, developing a career, keeping up with the neighbors or the colleagues, and so on. "Busy people" get through the "busy lives" simply wasting time in various inconsequential activities, to discover at the time of death that they have not accomplished anything, and they have lost their human opportunity in nothing more than animal propensities such as gratifying their senses and the senses of others, eating, sleeping, mating and defending, and trying to please people whose minds have unlimited demands.

This is why in the Vedic system each individual gave priority to the cultivation of transcendental knowledge, fully dedicating their time, energy and attention to this pursuit, living in the house of the *guru* and getting trained by him. After this all-important training, a person can safely proceed to take up other responsibilities in family and society, because he will be able to carry his consciousness through all the experiences of life and apply it to everything he does.

VERSE 40

अज्ञश्चाश्रद्धघानश्च संशयात्मा विनश्यति ।

ajñaścāśraddadhānaśca saṁśayātmā vinaśyati ।

नायं लोकोऽस्ति न परो न सुखं संशयात्मनः ॥ ४-४० ॥

nāyaṁ loko'sti na paro na sukhaṁ saṁśayātmanah ॥ 4-40 ॥

ajnah: a fool/ ignorant; *ca*: and; *asraddha-dhanah*: one who does not have faith; *ca*: and; *samsaya atma*: one who doubts; *vinasyati*:

perishes/ is (engaged in) self-destruction; *na:* not; *ayam:* in this; *loka:* world; *asti:* there is; *na:* not; *parah:* in the next life; *na:* not; *sukham:* happiness; *samsaya:* doubt; *atmanah:* of one self.

"A person who is devoid of knowledge and faith, and cannot overcome doubts will be lost. For one who is plagued by uncertainty there is no happiness in this world or in the next."

As we have seen, an initial act of faith is required to approach transcendental knowledge and consciousness, because we need to make the effort of actually experimenting on what the scriptures and the Guru say.

For someone who has always lived in the consciousness of material body identification, it is not automatically apparent that we are not the body or the mind, and that our true nature and identity is something that cannot be put under a microscope or weighed on a scale.

Earlier, *Gita* (2.29) clearly stated that the nature of the soul is so amazing that ordinary people find it very difficult to understand. All the experiences that we have on the material level tend, through our material senses, to convince us that matter is the only reality and spirit is a vague abstract concept that cannot be proven. Words, too, have limitations when it comes to describe the *adhokshaja*, that is beyond sense perception.

To actually come to understand Atman/ Brahman, we need to carefully listen to the instructions of the scriptures and *guru*, and meditate favorably on them in a sincere effort to understand them. This requires faith and sense control - we trust that very soon we will become able to perceive Transcendence - not through the material senses we use in every day's work, but through the spiritual senses that we naturally possess, and that ordinary people in a materialistic society never get the chance to use.

As we have already mentioned, any form of learning requires a measure of faith, especially in the beginning when we have no reference parameters or previous experience to verify the information that we are given. We just need to try, accepting the risk on the faith that the person who is giving us the instruction knows what he is talking about.

The word *samsayam* refers to chronic uncertainty and fear that prevent us to actually make the effort to put theory into practice. It is perfectly legitimate to ask all the questions we want (*pariprasnena*) and to verify all claims or statements, but we should overcome the chronic tendency to doubt. We should be willing to take some risk, because otherwise we will remain stuck in the same non-progressive situation forever.

For example as we already mentioned, we need a certain amount of faith to purchase a train ticket, as we are investing money and we obtain only a piece of paper, by which we are directed to board a certain train. Technically speaking, at that time we have no way of being sure that we will ultimately reach the destination we want, but without making the conscious choice of trusting the Railway service and board the train we are directed to, we will never be able to get to the place we want.

We will just be stuck in the railway station, wasting our time and experiencing negative emotions - fear, disappointment, anger, etc. A person who is unable to get beyond the doubting phase will lose everything, as he will not be able to enjoy life normally like simple-minded materialists do, and he will not be able to achieve the transcendental happiness that comes from the direct experience of the Atman/ Brahman.

He goes neither left nor right, and just remains stuck at the crossroads. The next verses will give further emphasis on this point, to stress its crucial importance.

VERSE 41

योगसंन्यस्तकर्माणं ज्ञानसञ्छिन्नसंशयम् ।

yogasannyastakarmāṇaṁ jñānasañchinnaśayaṁ ।

आत्मवन्तं न कर्माणि निबध्नन्ति धनञ्जय ॥ ४-४१ ॥

ātmavantam na karmāṇi nibadhnanti dhanañjaya ॥ 4-41 ॥

yoga-sannyasta: one who has attained renunciation through *yoga*; *karmanam*: of the activities; *jnana*: by knowledge; *sanchinna*: cut; *samsayam*: doubt; *atma-vantam*: situated in the *atman*; *na*: not; *karmani*: activities; *nibadhnanti*: create bondage; *dhananjaya*: O Dhananjaya (conqueror of wealth).

"One who practices the renunciation / has attained detachment from actions through *yoga* and has cut through all doubts by (the sword of) knowledge, resides in the self/ finds his desires turning towards the self. O Dhananjaya (conqueror of wealth), such a person is never bound by any action."

The expression *yoga sannyasta* summarizes all the requirements that have been explained before: faith, sense control, dedication are all based on the fundamental consciousness of renunciation, or detachment from the material identification and possessiveness.

This understanding is also reflected in the popular meaning of "sacrifice". However, such renunciation does not entail suffering or deprivation, and should not cause us to stop performing our proper duties (to family and social occupation) as many people mistakenly believe.

Such renunciation consists in giving up the selfish motivation that usually prompts people to work; it is *yoga sannyasta*, renunciation through the *yoga* of transcendental knowledge and consciousness.

A *yogi* continues to work in the best possible way, but he is detached from the results of the activities because he is already fully satisfied with inner happiness and peace. Having directly experienced such happiness and peace, a *yogi* is not disturbed by doubts any more, because he has a direct view of reality.

And because the inner Self is a source of unlimited happiness, he does not need to seek elsewhere, just like a man who owns a five star restaurant does not need to wander in the streets begging for food.

Still the *yogi* continues to work, and if circumstances require so, he is ready to go out and win wealth for a higher purpose, as indicated by the name Dhananjaya ("conqueror of wealth") that Krishna chooses to use in addressing Arjuna.

Such pursuit of wealth is not motivated by the desire for sense gratification or possession, but by the legitimate desire to perform *yajnas* for the benefit of the entire society.

According to the particular circumstances of place and time, such collection of funds can be used to build nice temples and ensure the worship of the Deity, or to publish spiritually enlightening literature, to distribute sanctified food (*prasadam*), to gather people for spiritual discussion and the glorification of the names, qualities, activities and teachings of the Personalities of Godhead, and to properly engage qualified persons in the service of society in a transcendental spirit of devotion.

Any beneficial activity (including "material welfare work") that is performed in a spirit of devotion and with a transcendental consciousness becomes an asset towards liberation, and does not bind us either with good or bad *karma*.

VERSE 42

तस्मादज्ञानसम्भूतं हृत्स्थं ज्ञानासिनात्मनः ।

tasmādajñānasambhūtaṁ hṛtsthāṁ jñānāsinaātmanaḥ ।

चित्त्वेन संशयं योगमातिष्ठोत्तिष्ठ भारत ॥ ४-४२ ॥

chittvainaṁ saṁśayaṁ yogamātiṣṭhottīṣṭha bhārata ॥ 4-42 ॥

tasmat: therefore; *ajnana-sambhutam:* created by ignorance; *hritstham:* settled in the heart; *jnana-asina:* with the sword of knowledge; *atmanah:* of the Self/ on the Self; *chittva:* cutting; *enam:* this; *samsayam:* doubts; *yogam:* in the Yoga; *atishtha:* (firmly) situated/ undertaking/ taking shelter of; *uttishtha:* rise (for battle); *bharata:* o descendant of Bharata.

"Therefore o Bharata, get up and fight, establishing yourself in yoga and using the sword of knowledge to slash off all these doubts that were born from ignorance and are infesting the heart."

This verse concludes the fourth chapter of *Bhagavad gita*, summarizing its contents.

By properly pursuing the transcendental knowledge and consciousness we destroy ignorance and illusion, but still it is possible to be attacked by doubts in the early stages of *sadhana*, because of a long habit of the mind to identify the self with the body and the thought processes, and also because of occasional association with materialistic persons or messages. Attachment to ignorance creates doubts in the heart and cause negative emotions such as fear, depression and confusion. A moderate amount of doubts can be useful in the beginning, before we choose a path, because doubt is a natural function of intelligence and can save us from many dangers and especially from the widespread cheating

enterprises that thrive in the field of religion and ideology in general. However, once we have verified that our spiritual guide is a qualified and sincere person, we should not allow doubts to sap our energy and determination, otherwise our progress will be slowed down.

What doubts are we talking about? Those about the Self, *atman*. The confusion about one's true nature and identity comes from a long habit of associating with the ignorance of material identification and attachment, and at times some new sprout can grow from the felled plant, if we are not careful enough to extirpate the roots.

The word *atmanah* can also be interpreted to indicate that one's doubts cannot be removed by anyone else. Faith is just the beginning, and it is required in order to listen attentively to the instructions of *guru* and *shastra*, and to take the leap "of faith" that makes us think and act in a transcendental way. The result of such activities will give us a direct experience that is the only true answer to all doubts.

If you wish to know what honey tastes like, you first need to gather the theoretical knowledge of what honey is - what it looks like, where it is normally found, how it is acquired (either from the bees or from a shop), the quantity that one should take, etc.

This requires faith because we need to believe what we are told, otherwise we will never be able to act on such information.

Next, faith must lead us forward, seeking for the actual thing - the honey - and when we have found something that corresponds with the theoretical descriptions we have heard, we need some more faith to invest our money or work to acquire the honey. Finally, there is one more act of faith, that consists in actually putting the honey into our mouth without listening to the hundreds of doubts

raised by the mind (could it be poisonous? oh my god it looks like carpenter's glue! how sticky and messy it is! will it really be palatable?).

After that point, the job of faith (*sraddha*) is over. We can actually and directly taste the sweetness of honey, and nobody will be ever able to convince us that honey is not palatable.

The two expressions *athistha* and *utthistha* are very interesting. *Athistha* means "situating himself on a strong basis" and *utthistha* means "rising up to move on". We need a center of permanent balance in our life, but such stability is dynamic and must be preserved by the proper action. We cannot remain stable by abstaining from action, because in this world everything moves and changes, and *sattva* quickly rots into *tamas* when it is not exercised dynamically. The secret is therefore to move on with the flow of Life, remaining solidly balanced on the proper consciousness of the Self, but always ready to perform one's duty selflessly.